THEOPHANO

THE CRUSADE OF THE TENTH CENTURY

FREDERIC HARRISON

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THEOPHANO

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The Crusade of the Tenth Century

A ROMANTIC MONOGRAPH

BY

FREDERIC HARRISON, M.A.

VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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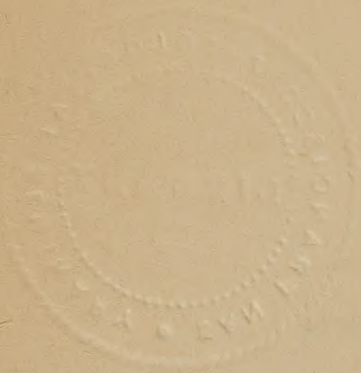

To

J. B. BURY, LITT.D., LL.D., ETC.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF MODERN HISTORY IN
THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Is inscribed

THIS MONOGRAPH IN BYZANTINE HISTORY

THE STUDY OF WHICH HE HAS

SO GREATLY INSPIRED

AND

ENLARGED

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THEOPHANO:

THE CRUSADE OF THE TENTH CENTURY

CHAPTER I

THE BOY BASILEUS

Towards the close of the long reign of Constantine Porphyrogennetus, seventh of that historic name, a hunting party from the royal capital of Constantinople was occupied in chasing the wild boar on the slopes of Mount Damatrys on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. This mountain, now called Bulgarlu, lay a few miles eastwards of Chrysopolis, the modern town of Scutari, opposite the Golden Horn. In the middle of the tenth century of our era, when this story opens, the view from the mountain on the Asian side of the Bosphorus was indeed very different from that which delights the traveller to-day, but it was not less beautiful in its exquisite union of wood, sea, rocky headland, stately towers, and domes.

The sun was just rising over the eastern hills in a fresh morning of spring—it was the year of our Lord 956—when a body of huntsmen, some on foot, and some on mountain ponies, were seen hastily emerging from the dense copses of the forest in the early dawn. Clothed in short leather jerkins and banded leggings, with close skull-caps, some carried lances, some bows and arrows: three held in leash powerful hounds, and others were bearing stout nets and poles. They were evidently returning home in haste and with anxiety painted in all their movements. A mounted man of some authority now pushed his way to the front and bade them seek for the nearest house where help and shelter could be obtained. Coming at last to a half-ruined woodman's hut, he struck his hunting-spear thrice against the rude door of the hovel, and imperiously asked if any man was within. A scared, half-clothed old man unbolted

the entrance, and stood with bare head, trembling before his questioner.

"Which is the nearest house wherein a wounded man can be sheltered, and who in this place has any art in staunching a flow of blood?" called out the horseman.

"Saint Michael save us!" cried the old dotard, "has fighting begun in sight of the Sacred Palace itself?"

"Tush, old fool, there has been a hunting accident, and a noble youth is now bleeding to death. Where, I ask again, can we find him shelter and a leech?"

"The house there of Craterus, the Laconian, at the first turn of the path below sometimes gives shelter and accommodation to belated travellers at need," quavered the terrified hind. "And his daughter has a gift for tending poor folk in sickness, and has been known to set a bone and bind up a broken head."

As he spoke, a small party of men in hunting garb emerged from the dense copse and cautiously descended the mountain path. They were bearing some burden in a rude litter, formed out of the stout poles and heavy net used to entangle the wild boar in the run from his lair. As they came down, it was seen that their charge was a tall and graceful youth, half wrapped in his hunting cloak, deeply smeared with blood. He was not dead, but ghastly pale and almost insensible. His beautiful head, that might have served for a marble Antinous, lay white and motionless on a pillow of purple silk. On each side of him rode a horseman of noble bearing and athletic frame, both turning their eyes with a look of anxiety and pain from the fainting youth to each other, and then looking out along the path beyond. Close beside the litter walked another man, grasping with all his force the thigh of the wounded youth, and striving to staunch the blood that oozed from it with a folded cloth.

Guided by the horseman in front they soon reached the house of Craterus, whom they succeeded in rousing from his bed with his household. It was a long, rambling edifice of no pretension without, but with an air of space and comfort within that no chance visitor would suspect. Craterus led the bearers and attendants to a spacious chamber in the rear of the house, where the youth was laid softly on a couch, and the old man bade his servants to summon his daughter and her maid with bandages to bind a wound. The master himself, with his snow-white beard, his delicate features, and lofty forehead, might

have stood for some bust of an Attic poet, had not his singularly handsome face been marred by keen, roving, and somewhat sinister eyes. With fox-like glances he scrutinised the youth and his companions, whilst actively busying himself with all that he could devise to save the sufferer's life.

At this moment there entered a girl closely veiled and shrouded in a long, loose wrapper, attended by her old nurse and a younger maid, bearing bandages and surgical appliances of a simple kind. The girl herself was so much concealed by her draperies that little of her could be seen, except some mysterious beauty like that of the veiled Isis; for her full wimple betrayed nothing but the perfect features of a Greek goddess, with lustrous eyes of deep sapphire. The old nurse removed the coverings from the limb of the youth, as he lay white and unconscious from loss of blood. Her trained hands laid bare the wounded thigh and leg which, but for the gash caused by the tusk of the boar, was of the faultless symmetry we see in the Hermes of Olympia, even as it left the chisel of Praxiteles. The maiden bent over him in pity and tenderness. They formed a group as if it were Aphrodite as she hung over the wounded Adonis. The nurse, directed by her, and aided by the nervous arm of the attendant, whose thumb so long had closed the wound, succeeded in passing a rude but effective tourniquet round the femoral artery, and having checked the pumping of the blood downwards, they dexterously bandaged the gaping wound.

A breathless silence ensued as they stood around with restoratives and strong scents and endeavoured to restore consciousness to the youth. At last a faint tinge of colour returned to the marble cheeks, and his lips moved again in inaudible murmurs. Craterus moistened his mouth with a draught of strong Samian wine, in which he had mixed some aromatic spices of the East. With a prolonged sigh at length the boy again opened his eyes; and a faint smile played round his blanched lips as he murmured: "Let not my father know, but carry me to my own lodgings before the news be abroad."

Slowly the wine and drugs that Craterus administered in measured sips began to tell on the splendid constitution of the athletic youth, who was in the highest training of body. He held low converse with his two chief attendants whilst Craterus, his daughter, and her women withdrew to the end of the chamber. "Where am I? Who are these? Whither are you bearing me?" he asked in a faint whisper; and, turning his

head, he perceived the master of the house and the women behind him. Then the young sufferer's eye caught sight of the veiled girl, whose close draperies seemed but to increase the grace of her figure. He saw her lustrous eyes beaming on him as he lay, in pity, wonder, and admiration. In all his wanderings after beauty, he had never in his life beheld such eyes. The fire, the passion, the profound mysteries they betrayed shot down to the marrow of his bones, and he sank back amazed and thrilled; exhausted with the spasm of enjoyment it had caused him. "Let me thank her who has dragged me from the jaws of death," he murmured; and with a feeble sign of his outstretched finger, as if he had been summoning a slave, he beckoned to the girl to approach.

He took her fingers in both of his own weak, cold hands; and, looking into her eyes with rapture, he said: "Who art thou that hast saved me? Is it some angel that follows Our Lady in heaven above, or rather, I think, an Oread from the train of our Huntress Artemis. Complete my cure, and restore me to manhood by bending down and kissing me, as our poets say Artemis on Latmos would kiss her Endymion." And he drew her down till her lips almost touched his; and, before she could speak, he had slipped a ring into her hand, whispering: "Yes! we shall meet again!"

Craterus, who had not observed this scene, now advanced to his daughter, saying, "Anastasia, my child, withdraw now to your chamber with your nurse; you may safely leave the wounded youth to us, and we will send for you if need arise again." In fact, the potions of Craterus and the bandages of his daughter were now doing so much to restore the strength of the young patient, that his companions agreed with the old man that all immediate danger to life was passed, and that he might safely be transported home by water. The patient himself insisted—and that in a tone of imperious command—that he should be forthwith carried to his barge and conveyed across the Bosphorus to Constantinople before the city was astir, or rumours of his accident were bruited abroad. With great care and adroitness the bandages were again tightened over his thigh; he was supplied with fresh restoratives and draughts of wine, and carried to the shore in the litter constructed out of the hunting net and poles.

As the party descended the hillside, it was closely watched by inquiring eyes from the house into which it had entered so

suddenly and with so much mystery. Neither Craterus nor any of his people had been able to learn the name or rank of the young huntsman, notwithstanding all their inquiries and the most curious search. All they knew was that some young sportsmen from Constantinople had arrived in a barge the evening before, and had spent the night in the mountain forest in pursuit of wild boar. Just before dawn the pony of one of the hunters had fallen in a hole and thrown its rider, who had been deeply gashed by the boar, even in the act of spearing the brute to death. Neither names nor particulars of the party could be obtained, but suitable rewards had been left for the help and accommodation afforded them.

Breathless, behind the wooden lattice-work that formed the blind of her chamber, Anastasia watched the litter as it was borne down the path, and she fancied that she caught sight of a kiss wafted towards her window, when the fingers of the helpless youth were faintly raised to his lips. From his own doorstep, also, Craterus saw the cavalcade disappear; and, as his fox-like eyes watched every detail of their dress and trappings, he shook his head and murmured that "It might bring him good, but it was wiser to keep silence and be careful what he did." As he slowly withdrew to an inner room he found his daughter waiting for him with eager looks, and ready to ply him with questions and suggestions. "Who was the wounded youth?—what did her father think he could be?—how came they to bring him to this house?—what did they say when they left?" These, and such questionings, the girl poured upon her father, who showed little inclination to answer her inquiries, even if he had known more than he did.

"Nay, my child, I have no means of satisfying your curiosity. They somewhat peremptorily declined to give me any kind of information, bidding our servants keep silence as to their visit on pain of some harm to them if they pressed their inquiries. They told me that the youth was a gallant of the city, whose accident was not to be made known lest it should alarm his parents, and they might prevent his following such dangerous sports."

"And why, my dear father, may I ask, why were you in such haste to bid me leave the chamber, even whilst the fair youth was still in need of our skill and comfort? We would gladly do our best for so gentle and comely a patient."

"Gentle and comely enough, my child, I do not deny, but

you must try to forget him and his accident; for certain it is that you will never see him again, nor know his name or his rank."

"I am not so sure of that," she murmured softly to herself, as she fingered the precious ring which her father had failed to see given when she had stooped over the youth on his couch.

The keen eyes of the old man had noticed an expression on his daughter's face, and he rejoined in an impressive tone, "Anastasia, my only child, and dearest hope, I charge you to remember what we are now, and whence we came. This youth, for all his gentleness of speech, is proud and wild. He is evidently some slip of a wealthy, perhaps of a noble family, and since he conceals his name and rank there is a mystery, if not a mischief, in his life. Be he what he may, he is wholly beyond our sphere. We shall never fall again in his way, and he would treat us with contempt if we did."

"Father," said the girl proudly, her luminous eyes aglow, "have you not often told me of the race we spring from, and of the blood of heroes that I inherit from my sainted mother?"

"True is it, Anastasia, O thou glorified image of my dear departed wife, thou hast, indeed, the blood of kings of Lacedæmon in thy veins, as thou renewest the beauty of the goddesses of Greece. Fallen as I am now in estate, despoiled of my patrimony by the corsairs of Saracens from Africa, I cannot forget that I was born of noble race and am the equal of those minions there across the strait. In wedding your mother I rose to a height above them. She came from Lacedæmon, and could trace descent from the ancient kings of Sparta. Crushed, plundered, and slain, as we have been for a thousand years by Romans, by Goths, by Armenians, Slavonians, and Isaurians, we have maintained the purity of our blood. Cherish it in thy memory, my child, that my Anastasia comes of the royal stock which produced such heroes as Lycurgus, Leonidas, Agesilaos, and Lysander. When I laid thy mother to rest in the last remnant of her paternal estate by the banks of Eurotas, I swore by the Mother of God that I would keep her daughter worthy of her and worthy of the heroes from whom both were sprung. Have I not done so, my child, have I not taught thee to hold thyself higher than these barbarians of Thrace and Anatolia? Nay, have I not taught thee to distrust the whining of their dirty priests and crazy hermits, and to cherish the purer fancies of our older faith, the inspiration of Apollo, the insight of

Athene, the grace of Aphrodite? Thou knowest also the inner meaning of these primæval creeds as expounded in the mysteries of Mithras and the Phrygian Mother."

"Would that thou hadst sworn by the Pallas of the Parthenon," his daughter broke in, "rather than by these idols worshipped by the mobs in the city. But am I not worthy then to mate with the son of the Autocrator himself, if Athene were to turn his eyes upon me so that he desired me for his wife?"

"His wife?—silly child, put away such absurd and unwholesome dreams. The Basileus, or the least minion of his Court, would no more think of taking thee to wife than he would take the meanest scullion in his kitchen. No! girl, he would take thee for his plaything for a day, for a week or two, till he flung thee to some parasite of his own like a cast-off shoe. Wife! wife!" shrieked the old man, "say rather toy, lap-dog, slave—not wife! Shall the daughter of Craterus, the Spartan, the descendant of a hundred kings, born of a mother in whose eyes the blood of these Augusti, children of Basil, the stable-boy, is ditch-water—shall she enter the hareem of these vicious mongrels who cringe round the Sacred Palace? Never! my child, I would rather see thee dead. Thou art above them in god-like race as thou art in god-like beauty, thou child of Helen of Troy, more like to her than ever yet has been any child of hers since. This lad, whoever he be, though not fit to be thy slave, is far above thee in legal rank, as he certainly is above thee in fortune. Think of him no more. Thou wilt never see him again. And if thou didst, it would be to thy ruin."

Anastasia was not wont to discuss matters with her father when he had mounted his high horse about the kings of Sparta, and the illustrious ancestry of her mother, whom she had almost forgotten. Still less did she take very seriously all his extraordinary ravings about the mysteries of Mithras and the eternal cult of Isis, which the old man had mixed up in a strange medley of occult superstitions. With her keen intellect and her aspiring temper, Anastasia had been nurtured by her father from childhood in proud disdain of the mongrel races of the capital which had now become a veritable *colluvies gentium*, as, indeed, from that day to this it has remained. From infancy she had been taught to look coldly on the endless ceremonies and miraculous paraphernalia of the Byzantine Church, though her practical mind had inclined her to little interest in the esoteric mysteries of Mithraism in which Craterus would dream away whole days.

She regarded these dreams as the unhallowed maunderings of a morbid mind. And whilst she outwardly conformed to the ceremonial cult of the Christians around her, her maiden day-dreams would ever turn back to the immortal creations of Hellenic poetry and myth. She would conjure up to herself visions of a Helen of Troy, a Clytemnestra, a Medea; even an Aspasia, and a Thais; she knew the thrilling story of Byzantine palace history; how Athenais, the daughter of a philosopher of Athens, had blossomed out into Eudocia, the Empress; how Theodora had stepped from the dancing stage to the throne of the world; how Irene had divided the Roman realm even with the mighty Charles himself.

Long after she had quitted her father, Anastasia sate musing in her own chamber, from time to time scrutinising the ring which the wounded youth had given her, and which she had hastily concealed in her bosom. Again and again she turned the jewel to the light, and examined it on every side. Could it be, indeed, an emerald—a real emerald—of such a size, and such lustre? If it were, indeed, a veritable stone it was worth a king's ransom! Could the stranger lad have so magnificent a ring in his possession, and would he lightly hand it to an unknown girl? And yet—could a youth evidently so noble, so wealthy, bear about on his finger a thing of paste? Anastasia knew something of jewels, antique enamels, and sardonyx cameos, as of reliquaries, crosses, and miraculous *ikons;* for her father was supposed to procure such things from time to time from correspondents he had in Asia Minor, and to dispose of them successfully to the travellers who would come to his place on their way to the capital from the East. And Anastasia had half suspected that the old Corinthian attendant who had charge of her father's curios had done something more than always repair or reset the pieces on which she saw him secretly engaged.

And whilst she turned the jewel round and round, she fancied she could read some letters engraved; but her untrained eye, for all her curiosity, was not able to put the words together. She called her nurse, the aged woman who had been about her since her mother's death, and in whose fidelity she was sure she could confide. "Charmion," she said, "dear old girl, here is an adventure. As I was turning over the old jewel-case of my sainted mother in heaven I found this ring, which had been strangely overlooked by my father for years. Take it to

Leontius in his workshop, and ask him to tell us what it is, and if he can read these words that are engraved around the setting. But be sure you charge him, as he values my favour, to breathe not a word of it to man or woman—least of all my father. It would break his heart to think that he had neglected so dear a relic of my mother—and thou knowest that all she had of jewels are mine."

The crone eyed the ring with keenness, and her eyes then fell on her lovely mistress, who bore her scrutiny with a tranquil smile. She hurried off to Leontius, who was preparing to "reset" an *encolpion* that was destined for a great ecclesiastic. The old engraver took the ring, and examined it with attention and no small wonder. Then he scrutinised it through a crystal lens, and tried it against some pieces that he had in a case by his side. He looked hard at the nurse, and she looked at him. Neither spoke. "Nurse," he said, at last, "the ring is one of the finest and largest emeralds I ever beheld, and it is set in a rare enamel of exquisite work. Yes! words have been engraved within the margin, and I will write them on this slip of parchment." He took his stile, and, peering closely with his crystal lens to the minute letters in the ring, he wrote, Κυριε βοηθει Ρωμανωι. "No!" said he, "the last letters must be somewhat defaced, it must be Ρωμαιοις—Lord, help the Romans! It could hardly be Roman! Could it be?" said the old artist in cameos, talking to himself.

Old Charmion hurried back to Anastasia, too eager that she might report her news and ply her young mistress with questions to notice the intense agitation of mind that Anastasia concealed under her outward ease. "How came she to find it?" asked the crone again and again. "How was it overlooked? How had her mother obtained it? What would she do with it?" and a thousand similar questions, which Anastasia put off with affected indifference and studious silence. Nor could the girl rid herself of the nurse's importunate curiosity until she had peremptorily insisted on the attendant leaving her alone in order to prepare her bath in another chamber.

Left alone, Anastasia sprang up in a whirlwind of emotion, pacing the room, and flinging up aloft her shapely arms in the attitude of a priestess at the shrine of the Delphic Apollo. "Mother of God! Daughter of Zeus! Queen of Love! Where am I? What is this? What will come of it? An emerald of priceless worth! Why, who could wear such a

thing but one from the Palace of Cæsar—wear it—nay, wear it in a forest chase, in a wild night on the mountain? 'Lord, help the Romans'—who could bear about such a meaningless prayer? 'Help the Romans.' Yes! the priests and monks whine out these litanies in their daily canticles. But does a youth who looks like a young prince engrave on his seal so stupid a motto? Prince! Ah! what am I saying? Why, what other prince is there but Romanus, son of our purple-born Constantine, Basileus of the Romans? Queen of Paphos, and of the world! He *was* Romanus—the young Basileus himself—lovely as Adonis—and he loves me—he shall love me. Augustus that is to be—and why should not I, too, be Augusta by divine right—of beauty?" And the girl flung herself down on a couch and buried her face in her hands, as if she needed to shut out from her eyes the excess of light which beamed down on her, even as Zeus descended upon Semele in thunder and flame.

CHAPTER II

THE WARDEN OF THE EASTERN MARCH

WHILST this was passing, the party which was bearing the wounded young Basileus moved on with haste and care to the shore of the Bosphorus, where the barge was moored. The two leading horsemen pressed on a little in advance to secure the embarkation with speed. The foremost was a man not yet of middle life, the very model of chivalrous strength, audacity, and animation. He was dark of hue, even for an Eastern Roman, with fiery black eyes and raven hair, chiselled features, and an aquiline nose, and a complexion of clear and delicate olive, just tinted with colour. He wore a hunting suit, and bore a short weapon of exquisite form and mounting chased in gold, of Persian design. His whole bearing was that of a leader of men, the ideal of a cavalry commander, or of some knight-errant bent on romantic adventures, such as those heroes we now read of in the *Arabian Nights*. His companion, an older and graver man, who treated him as of higher rank than himself, now rode up to the leader, and in low tones seemed pressing on him some urgent counsels. "My Lord Basil Digenes, the accident of to-day may be of deep moment to the whole Roman Empire. If the bandages of the old Greek and his daughter should fail to hold, our young charge may yet slip through our fingers before we can reach the Palace. What would be our fate if we brought home to our King of Kings his only son a corpse?"

"Nay, Theodore, my good man, we shall save the boy; the Augustus himself is too just and reasonable a king to suppose that you and I would neglect his child. He knows that we would risk our lives rather than a hair of his head should be harmed."

"His Majesty Born-in-the-Purple is, indeed, a most upright judge and as kind a master as Rome ever saw. But are you sure that the feeble Empress might not be worked on by women

and eunuchs, and our rivals seek to strike us down in a Palace plot?"

"What care I for rivals?" cried Basil, with a smile of triumph; "I fear no man, and no man of all Rome fears me. From Cæsar to servant they love me and know me to be their friend and protector."

"True, indeed! most noble Akritas, and therein lies a matter that is worth thy thought. Hast thou not noticed how our most illustrious Sovereign Lord, after forty-four years of the burden of State, has begun to weary on his throne? He may —well!—he may abdicate," he whispered in the ear of Basil, "in favour of his heir. Our young Basileus has entered on his eighteenth year; but he may not survive his father. My Lord Basil, you know his way of life as well as I do. He will never live to see his father's years. He may die of this very wound—may the Saints save him—and us too—he may die this very day—he may meet such another chance ere the year is out. What then? Where will the throne of Rome be then, most illustrious commander and victorious Warden of the Marches? What will happen then?"

"Most sapient Chamberlain," said Basil, "his Sacred Majesty will name a worthy successor, and honour him with the hand of one of the five Princesses, his daughters. And if the Basileus were to die without such nomination, the Senate and army chiefs would find such an Emperor themselves as they have so often done of old."

"And where would they find such a chief," murmured the Chamberlain in the insinuating voice of the courtier, "where but in the person of the most valiant hero, Lord Warden of the Eastern Frontier, victorious in a hundred fights, the Achilles of our warlike odes—Basil, of royal name and royal race, offspring of a Roman princess and a Syrian Emir, who had come to Christ? Basil Digenes, I tell thee, potent Akritas and chief, should the throne of Rome become vacant we should all look to thee to mount and hold it!"

"*Retro! Satanas!*" cried out the Akritas (*i.e.* the Warden of the Marches), with a gay gesture of scorn, "tempt not the most loyal servant of our Most High Sovereign Lord! If his son were not to reign, I tell thee again, it would have to be some ennobled husband of one of his Majesty's daughters."

"And who would that be," said the wily Chamberlain, "save that chief on whom the loveliest of them all, the gentle Agatha,

her father's favourite, casts such looks of tenderness? Why, the Sacred Palace rings with gossip of her sighs and blushes, when the harpers sing the deeds of 'The Flower of our Roman Chivalry,' as the poets name the Warden of the Eastern March!"

"A truce to thy jests, my Lord of the Chamber, and profane not with thy Court scandal the name of the sweetest, purest, most modest virgin in your city of Sin and Folly. Things are too serious for idle jesting, and the fate of Rome and our Holy Church is even now hanging in the scales of the Angel of Judgment. A man who has lived as I have since boyhood, in the saddle and on the borders, knows what are the perils and the trials which are gathering round the Empire from the East and from the North."

"Oh! forbear such ominous words, most noble Lord Warden," cried the Chamberlain, crossing himself more from habit than from superstition; "was Rome ever so great and glorious as she is to-day? Behold in the morning light the splendour of our Eternal City—we can see afar across the straits the gilded dome of the Holy Wisdom and of a hundred fanes. Was any Autocrator more truly worshipped and more worthy of our worship than our Most Majestic Sovereign Born-in-the-Purple? What invincible armies does he send forth! What fleets and merchandise crowd the Golden Horn! What multitudes from all parts of this earth swarm in the streets of our matchless capital! What a galaxy of treasure, pomp, and beauty amazes all who are admitted to the Sacred Palace of our King!"

"Vanity of vanities!" groaned the great soldier, more to himself than to the Chamberlain, "it is thus that courtiers beguile our Sacred Majesty by idle vaunts. We who in the distant marches have to bear the brunt of the enemy, who have to rule those provinces which he drains to the bone by his ravages—we know all the peril that encompasses our Empire and threatens its ruin. Egypt, Syria, Sicily, have been torn from it by victorious Saracens and worshippers of the Prophet. Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria, have forsworn Christ and Rome; and for centuries have submitted to Allah and the Caliph. On the Cilician frontier we hold the passes by daily combats, wherein to-day we find our match—it may be to-morrow our masters. The savage corsairs, who have seized Crete and Cyprus, tear to pieces the seaboard of Asia

and of Greece at their own sweet will. Italy is lost to the Empire for ever, and these Teutons and Latins are boasting already that the Empire of Rome is one—and is theirs, not ours. Within a few days' march of Constantinople itself there is a Bulgarian kingdom which may pour on us again in an avalanche at any hour. And beyond them are Slavs, Ross, Patzinaks, Chazars, and Turks, and many a barbarous horde beyond. I tell thee, Chamberlain, as I have come hither to tell our Sovereign Augustus and his council, that the Empire can be saved no longer, but by great and thoroughly-equipped armies of stalwart Romans, not of hired barbarians—but above all can be saved only by a mighty soldier, by a great general, by a hero whom his men will follow to the death."

"And where shall his Majesty and his valiant soldiers find such a man but in the victor of a hundred fights, the hero of a thousand war-songs, the glorious Lord Warden of the Eastern Marches—our commander-in-chief that must be—our Sovereign Augustus that might be—if God in His inscrutable purposes took to Himself our Sublime Majesty and his adorable son and heir?" fawned the Chamberlain, as he stole nearer to the ear of the Akritas, and crossed himself again and again in contemplation of the twofold Imperial obsequies.

"That can never be," replied Basil Digenes, with an air of deep conviction and thought, "my birth has made it impossible, inconceivable, almost a sacrilege to contemplate. My very name reminds the Romans that I am but half a Roman, and bear in my blood and skin the colour of the Prophet. My noble father, Mousur, Emir of Edessa as he was, born a Syed of the sacred stock of Islam, and from early youth a hostage at the court of the Governor of Cappadocia, the illustrious Ducas, forsook his people and his faith for the love of my mother. Yes! Eudocia Ducas was as noble as he, fair and good enough to make a saint forswear heaven to win her. My father made me a soldier of Christ and of Rome, and such I will live and die. But the blood of the Emirs of Edessa stirs in my veins to-day, even when I am leading the charge upon their ranks. And I have seen in the armies of the Prophet courage as high and hearts as pure as any who worship the Cross. Never will I stoop to join in the insults that your craven mobs in the city delight to cast at the children of Hagar. I trust in Christ: but I will not revile the Prophet or his servants. And now tell me, most illustrious and most politic Lord of the Purple Chamber,

do you think the Patriarch and his priests and acolytes will ever consecrate under the dome of the Holy Wisdom me, Digenes—'the Half-Breed,' the son of the Saracen, with the blood of the Prophet of Mecca darkening my very cheek?"—he ground out these words between his teeth; and then he added with the ringing voice that was natural to him—"No! my Lord Theodore, tempt me not with these Palace intrigues. I am proud to serve our Basileus as the Warden of the Marches. I will fight—I will sweat and die for Rome and for Christ. But I am not of the mould in which your Cubicular conspirators are cast."

"Oh! dream not that I am capable of hinting at such treason, my Lord Basil. I sought counsel only in the lamentable, yet conceivable chance that might befall this Empire and our Sacred and Imperial stock. On whom, then, would your Eminence propose that we should turn our hopes, if God in heaven were indeed to afflict us so sorely?"

"How can you ask?" shouted the Lord Warden, almost bounding from his saddle; "there is but one, and he fills every mouth with his glory. There is but one man who can save Rome, but one man whom every Roman warrior will follow, as if he were St. Michael, with the Sword of Heaven in his hand. Whom could I mean but Nicephorus, the Commander-in-Chief of the Forces of Asia, the greatest hero of the heroic race of Phocas; son, grandson, brother, and kinsman of the most valiant commanders whom Rome has ever known. Ah! had you ever seen our glorious Nicephorus at the head of his army; had you ever heard the roar of his men as his eagle eye swept along their ranks; had you ever watched him as I have, Chamberlain, in the storm of a bloody fight, firm as a rock, alert as a young lion, keen as a hawk, and sublime master of the whole battle array—had you ever seen him in the hour of victory, directing all men to his will, like Homer's Zeus presiding over the shock of earthly men below—you would not ask, most eminent Lord of the Sacred Chamber, who was the destined saviour of Rome—under God and His Mother be it said—who is our born Chief? Why! man alive—Nicephorus Phocas—whom to follow is to be blessed—whom to know is to honour and to serve."

The supple Chamberlain was well aware of the enthusiasm for the Armenian chief in which all the fighting men of the Empire were agreed; and he knew how deeply the Autocrator

himself valued—if he also feared—the genius of his great Captain. But he also knew how sorely the Palace held Nicephorus in dread. They knew him to be stern, just, of unimpeachable honour, of almost fanatical piety, and of a loyalty that neither flattery nor prize could seduce. This terrible soldier, with his inexorable justice and his inevitable insight, would be a grievous burden to the Palace, and to the silken minions who thronged its halls. The ingenious Theodore accordingly made haste to drop the subject and efface from the mind of the gallant Warden the impression he had sought to instil into it. And as they had now reached the shore, the whole attention of the party was occupied in placing the young Cæsar in safety and in comfort on his luxurious barge.

The task was rapidly and skilfully accomplished under the masterly care of the Lord Warden, and soon the Imperial barge was being swiftly oared across the two or three miles of sea which divided the Palace from the Asian shore. The young Basileus lay peacefully on purple cushions beneath a rich awning of silk, tended by his body-servant, who from time to time moistened his lips with sorbets and cordials, whilst the keen glances of Basil watched over his charge as he directed the course of the boat. Both he and the Chamberlain seemed lost in thought, though the nature of their meditations was somewhat unlike.

The sun had now risen in a dazzling May morning, and was bathing in its light that most glorious of all earth's landscapes. As they rounded the Headland of Keras, that we now call Seraglio Point, the barge was in the centre of that scene which the ancient and the modern world have agreed to be the most imposing and most beautiful that Europe and Asia can show. The profusion of form and colour is, indeed, quite dazzling to those to whom it is unfamiliar. Bays, gulfs, creeks, and seas were stretched in endless vistas on every side, the gentle rippling of those azure waters glancing with joy in the morning sun. Out of the waters, from point to point, there rose terraces, gardens, towers, palaces, and churches, radiant in marble and gold, thickly strewn with groves of beech, acacia, arbutus, and cypress; dotted about with fruit trees, now in their snowy blossom. Northwards the grand "river" of the Bosphorus swept slowly down in the majestic tide of its blue stream: stately cliffs and wooded crags rising on either side of the

strait, and these were clothed with countless towers, villas, monasteries, and temples.

On their right the Golden Horn ran up far into the land. This branch of the sea was crowded with every kind of floating ship—dromons, or warships of the State, with their brazen beaks, banks of long oars, and high masts fitted to hurl the shells of Greek fire;—the bright-sailed merchant vessels from West and East: from Amalphi, Venice, Durrachium, Barium, Naupactus, Cherson, the Ægean, the Propontis, Smyrna, and Rhodes. Thousands of busy crafts were moored in the great harbour, whilst light caïques and skiffs scudded across the narrow seas. In front of the returning barge rose the tremendous ramparts, towers, and gates of New Rome, encircling the vast city with that massive range of fortifications which for eight centuries flung back the most valiant assailants, whether from the North or from the East—those fortifications whereof the pathetic ruins and remnants to-day are the most majestic memorial of its forces that the ancient world has left to us.

And behind those miles and miles of wall, battlement, tower, and gate the Seven Hills of New Rome rose into the morning sky, one after the other in picturesque confusion of terrace, dome, tower, cloister, and palace: all bowered in groves of flowering shrubs and avenues of acacia and tall dark cypress. And all around this vast and variegated pile—this, the central city of the world, as all who saw it felt it to be, whether they were Latin or Greek, Russ or African, Christian or Moslem, philosopher or barbarian—there mounted up into the blue welkin ranges of wooded hills, crags, headlands, and far-off mountain outlines, softly folded in pencilled lines and mists of white haze. Southwards, the eye ranged across the Propontis, that immense inland lake girt with smiling bays, inlets, and cliffs, with the nine islands we now call the "Princes Isles," each clothed with villas, convents, gardens, and forests. And, far beyond, across the sea and hill, rose dazzling white in the morning sun, in long broken ranges of snow, that glorious Bithynian Olympus which ever looks down over the Imperial City like the heavenly throne of its Guardian God.

CHAPTER III

THE BETROTHAL

In the wooded slopes on the Asian side of the Bosphorus it was a sultry evening of midsummer. The sun had already descended behind the mountains of Thrace, in a deep glow which was reflected in the glassy sea. A single worshipper was prostrated before the chief *ikon* in the tiny shrine of Saint Demetrius that stood in the forest not far from the house of Craterus, the Laconian. The humble dome, lit only by one struggling lamp beneath the image, was dark and silent. The eye that had become accustomed to the gloom could have perceived at last the figure of a girl at her devotions, completely enveloped in a long, dark cloak. "Mother of God, be of help to Anastasia," she murmured again and again—then she listened; now she waited in silence; and at last she drew furtively from her bosom a slip of writing that had been flung at sunset into the open casement of her chamber—"Be to-night at the shrine of Demetrius."

Yes! at last a light step was heard; and though she forbore to raise her eyes from the altar and remained in prostration before it, the worshipper's eager ear perceived the alert pace of a man who swiftly came up beside her. It was the tall and graceful youth whose wound she had tended, now restored to health, in all the glow of his young beauty and the graceful assurance of his high estate. He was again in hunting garb; but round his neck and on his fingers glittered jewels which even to the rustic eye of Anastasia seemed worthy of a king's son; and his dagger was of the most exquisite Damascene work, mounted with precious stones and enamel. He raised her from the ground with smiles of mingled triumph and admiration, as if he were a young god who had descended to toy with an earthly lover. "I told you, my nymph of the woodman's hermitage, that we should meet again. And now that they have put back into my veins all the blood that I lost

that night, I come to present my thanks to the beautiful nurse to whom I owe my life. Tell me, my lovely wood-nymph, what gift would please thee most." And without waiting for an answer, he threw his powerful arm round the girl, and pressed on her lips a passionate kiss.

Anastasia flung herself out of his arms and started back, the long, dark cloak falling from her shoulders to the ground. She stood there in flowing robes of pure white gauze that clung to her rounded form and made her look like the Virgin as she stood abashed and listened to the Angel at the Annunciation. Her bosom heaved with emotion and indignation ;—her cheek was pale but lovely in its pallor, her eyes glowed with fire, and her open lips seemed to tremble with unspoken words. At last she found voice to speak. "Forbear, rude man, to insult a maiden whom Our Lady of Mount Damatrys has taken under her holy keeping." The gay youth laughed aloud. "Why! my forest beauty, I thought you knew me. I am Romanus, son of the Basileus, at your service, to give you whatever you please to ask—be it jewels, robes, or charms, but in any case the love of a king's son," he murmured, seizing her again, and with a look of genuine rapture.

"This to me, thy consecrated maiden, O Holy Theotokos," shrieked Anastasia, with an air of frantic disdain, as she sank to the pavement and flung herself down sobbing before the image of the Saint. Her agony and outraged modesty quite touched the young Cæsar, who, profligate as he had already become, was still very young and had gentle feelings by nature. In all his experience of the houris of the Palace and the City, he had met nothing like this before, and the sight of such wonderful beauty, united to such miraculous modesty, filled him with a new love, such as he had never dreamed of in all the adventures of his gay, young life. "Nay," he said at last, after trying in vain to alleviate her sobs, "I mean not to offer you any offence, nor am I such a brute as could give a moment's pain to the loveliest woman in my father's empire—to her who has saved my life. Anastasia, I have loved you since that hour when you seemed to have come down like the Angel who comforts a dying man. I love you now, I love you to distraction. I would fling away Empire itself, if I might keep you. I swear by our own Saint Stephen in the Daphne, that I will give thee a place near the Augusteum, and thou shalt have the establishment of a princess. I will have thee acknowledged by the

Palace as the chosen love of Cæsar—and when I am Autocrator myself, thou shalt ask of me what thou wilt—O thou most lovely and dearest of women. I will——"

"Ah! Saints in heaven, and thou Holy Mother of God!" shrieked Anastasia again with a fresh outburst of convulsive sobs. "Must I listen to such insults? If thou art indeed Romanus, son of Constantine Born-in-the-Purple, thou knowest not to whom thou darest to offer thy dishonourable love. No breath of scandal has ever tainted me or mine. My birth is, indeed, far above thine, proud as thou boastest thine. My ancestors were kings in Greece, when all in this land were barbarians. My blood for a thousand years has run in royal houses; fallen, despoiled, forgotten, but pure as the snow on Mount Olympus. Who was thy great-grandfather's sire—O Romanus of the race of Basil, the Macedonian? Did he know himself—did any man know—or his own mother? And thou, his direct descendant, offerest outrages to me, the daughter of a hundred kings, the chosen maiden of Our Lady here!" And she sank back exhausted with her passion, sobbing aloud—"Because I am lonely, poor, an orphan, and unprotected by man—though watched over by the Queen of Heaven above."

And here she broke away with a faint scream: and whirling around her limbs the flowing draperies of white gauze, like a Mænad chased by a Satyr she rushed across the chapel; and, dashing into a small dark oratory at the other side, she seemed to seize the *ikon* of Our Lady with her hand as if claiming sanctuary of her Patron Divinity.

Romanus followed her, as soon as his eyes could detect her in her retreat; and, panting with his effort, he cried, "Anastasia, listen to me again, and forgive my words of mad love! I swear by the Saints above that I will make you my wife, so soon as I am seated on the Golden Throne," gasped Romanus, now wild with love, passion, and excitement.

"Swear that we are betrothed this moment in the sight of God and His Saints. Swear it with thy hand placed on the *ikon* of Our Lady here, as God shall save thy soul in the Last Judgment. Swear thus—'I, Romanus, take thee, Anastasia, for my wedded wife, till death do us part.' Swear it with thy hand on this *ikon*, made, as thou knowest, by no earthly hand. Swear as I tell thee, or never see me again!"

Mad with love, and half intoxicated with adventure as he

was, Romanus uttered the sacramental words half in jest and half in earnest;—he hardly knew what he was doing. And as he spoke the venerable hermit, whose cell adjoined the chapel, a priest who had long forsaken the world, stepped forth in his ceremonial robes from the dark corner in which he had been on his face at his devotions, quite concealed from view. "Amen, amen," the venerable man of God said with profound solemnity in the ritual chant. "Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. My son and my daughter, go thy ways in peace. Ye are betrothed husband and spouse. May Mary the Divine Mother and Saint Demetrius guide ye both in blessed wedlock."

And, as he spoke, Anastasia slipped back into the arms of her old nurse, Charmion, who was holding her cloak hard by, in another dark corner of the chapel. The hermit and the two women passed noiselessly out into the night. And the young Romanus stood alone in the dark chapel, revolving in his mind what it meant, and what was to be the end of his amour. He had caught sight of the girl already once or twice in the three months that had passed during his convalescence, but always in presence of her nurse or father, and he felt himself to have sunk madly in love with her marvellous beauty and queenly air. Of a truth, she could be no burgher's daughter: he had already heard vague rumours about Craterus and his royal ancestors. And where had he seen that old hermit, who had so mysteriously sprung up out of the dark cell beside the altar of Our Lady? He thought he had once before met those fox-like eyes and that lofty brow. But the long, white beard and priestly robes? Priest! monk! hermit! Had he sworn wedlock before the Priest of the Most High? Betrothed! Married! Was it a jest or something more? And the lad laughed—and then he drew a deep sigh, and then again he laughed, and as he left the sacred spot he swore a deep oath by the Saint to whom he never was forsworn, that Anastasia should be his—come what might. And as he passed on to his attendants who waited for him in the copse hard by, he determined to call to his counsels the Chamberlain, the Lord Theodore, whose skill in intrigue he knew to be unrivalled, and of whose fidelity to himself he was entirely assured.

The Lord Chamberlain listened carefully to the story of the young Prince's adventure, and asked him again and again to repeat exactly what had passed. But the youth was in a state

of transport and excitement so keen that the true facts were only drawn out of his memory by degrees. "It would be too great a risk," said the courtier at last, "to stir up a scandal in connection with the shrine of Saint Demetrius so near to the city, which holds this particular *ikon* in such awe. And if the girl still resists all promises and gifts, your Imperial Highness would be wise to think of her no more."

"Never! never!" shouted the Prince in a passion. "I will give up the throne itself, my life, my chance of heaven, but not this girl, whom I have sworn by Saint Stephen of the Daphne to make my wife."

"Surely not!" said Lord Theodore, now in genuine alarm. "How often has the Patriarch, in confession, warned your Highness against being forsworn by that Saint of all others! But tell me precisely the words that passed. You never have vowed marriage in presence of a witness?"

And now the youth, sobered by the evident anxiety of the wily courtier, rehearsed all the circumstances and the words spoken in presence of the hermit, who had pronounced at the altar the fatal words of betrothal, as the old nurse would witness.

"And the old hermit betrothed you two, if he did not actually marry you to the woman?" stammered out the Chamberlain; and he struck his forehead in dismay as he muttered, "God in heaven help us!" For he well knew the close confidence that existed between the hermit of Saint Demetrius and the venerable Patriarch of Constantinople. He well knew also how deeply the Patriarch abhorred the character and parasites of the young Prince, and how gladly the bold and sincere High Priest of Hagia Sophia would see the succession of Romanus fail or be set aside. Even the experienced craft of Theodore did not suspect the identity of the hermit, and he never doubted for an instant that the old priest of Saint Demetrius thoroughly understood and would use all the power over the Court which the incident had given him.

"If, indeed, the sacramental words of marriage, or even of betrothal, have been pronounced before and by such a holy man as the hermit, and one so deeply reverenced in the city, the case is assuredly fit for all our care and thought," at last murmured the Chamberlain. Should he not himself promote this intrigue? He reflected. He had heard much already of the surpassing beauty of Anastasia, of her consummate grace

and adroitness, and of all her pretensions to royal birth in Greece. He began to run over in his mind the marvellous history of humble beauties who had mounted the throne of the Sacred Palace. He saw, as in a vision, how he, Theodore, might rule supreme in a new reign, if he could bind to himself the infatuated Prince and this lovely, but utterly untutored, girl as his wife. And he well knew that the life and the reign of Constantine Born-in-the-Purple were running down fast into their final sands.

And so the Lord Chamberlain escorted homewards his young lord and his apt pupil, himself deeply meditating on the future and its vast possibilities, whilst the love-sick Prince lay silent in his barge on the moonlit water, wrapt in delicious reveries, as he recalled every word and look of his betrothed, and pressed to his lips the kerchief that he had snatched from her bosom when he held her in his arms.

CHAPTER IV

THE YOUNG AUGUSTA

THE Lord Chamberlain was not the man to disappoint the young Prince, his future master; and for some months he had carried on a most elaborate series of schemes and intrigues. He plunged into these all the more that he perceived how rapidly the health of the Emperor was sinking day by day. Constantine Porphyrogennetus was himself aware of his decline. One night he had received a solemn embassy from Olga, the Tsarina of the Russ, with more than usual ceremonial. A great feast had been celebrated in the Golden Banqueting Hall, or Chrysotriklinos. This gorgeous chamber was roofed by a spacious dome of rich mosaic designs, and lighted by sixteen windows ranged around the base of the dome. In the centre hung a vast chandelier of silver, whilst the walls were decorated with figures of Saints on a background of golden mosaic. The floor was paved with precious marbles, now covered with rare carpets and rugs, and the Emperor with the Patriarch and three other great officers had dined at the golden table of High State.

The feeble Emperor, who had struggled to go through all the appointed offices of a ceremonial banquet, had been borne by his cubiculars of the chamber through the great silver gates that led into the Long Saloon; and whilst dessert and condiments were served to his guests in the Aristaion, he was carried into the Imperial bedchamber and laid upon a couch.

There the Most Majestic Autocrator sank down with so much exhaustion that the Augusta and her son, Romanus, were summoned to his side.

It was a scene that night in the innermost privy chambers of the Sovereign to point an epigrammatic essay on vanity or a pathetic sermon upon death. Whilst the rude envoys from the Russian capital in Kiev were conducted, open-eyed and stolid as they were, from one gorgeous hall to another, and were plied

with every sight that could fill them with awe of the Autocrator of the Romans; whilst the marble corridors, ante-rooms, and portals that surrounded the Golden Banqueting Hall were crowded with senators, cubiculars, proto-spathaires, acolytes, and patricians, all in state robes, with chains and badges of office; and with them in picturesque confusion were mixed the guard of honour, and the quaint uniforms of the Varangian battle-axemen, the Mighty Lord of the World and King of Kings lay faintly reclining on a couch. His head was supported by his youngest daughter, Agatha, who hung over her father with loving care. Beside him on a low stool sat the aged Empress, Helena, herself not much stronger than her husband, and by her side the tall, handsome figure of the young Basileus in all the glow of his youthful grace, and the jewelled robes of state in which he now was arrayed.

"Our son has come, my Lord and august spouse," the Augusta began in winning tones, "to ask a blessing of his Imperial father, and to pray for his sanction to the marriage as to which our Romanus has already spoken to us both. The noble lady, Euphemia, the wife of our Lord Treasurer, is the kinswoman of the beautiful Theophano; and has duly presented her at my Court. The Lord Theodore himself has made ample inquiries, and finds that this lady is of royal descent from the ancient kings of Sparta, and is herself as accomplished and discreet as she certainly is surpassingly beautiful. If it be the will of my Lord the Sovereign, the Lady Euphemia, who is now with her fascinating kinswoman in my private apartments, will introduce her to your Sacred Majesty, and she will ask a blessing on her betrothal to our son."

"We have long desired to see our son well wedded before we are called to Christ ourselves," the gentle Emperor began, "and have long felt grieved that he could never decide on his choice. But so all-important is the conduct of the future Basilissa that perhaps he did well to wait. If this lady be of royal birth, and if our trusty Treasurer and his virtuous lady are fully assured of her discretion, deportment, and breeding, our son shall have his way and his father's blessing. How is she named, my son, and since when, and from whence, has she come to our Court?"

"She is called Theophano, my royal father, a name we all love and honour as that of my darling sister. And this wonder of the world is but recently arrived at the palace of her kins-

woman, the Lady Euphemia, from the banks of the Eurotas in the Peloponnesus, where her father once held a now decayed principality. Let me bring her to the presence of your Majesty; and your profound understanding of ceremonial deportment will perceive how truly this royal lady was designed by Heaven itself to be a Basilissa."

With the Emperor's consent, the Chamberlains and ladies of the Court at once summoned the Lady Euphemia, accompanied by her kinswoman, Theophano. The young Basileus himself stepped forward, as the Lord Cubicular-in-Waiting announced the noble ladies in due form, and led his Theophano to the couch of his father, himself beaming on her with admiration and love. As she slowly advanced, with the three appropriate reverences in use, the serene composure of her countenance just mantling over with subdued blushes, all eyes in the chamber were bent on her and every soul felt a thrill of wonder and admiration. Theophano was now arrayed in silk-embroidered robes, the most sumptuous which the art of Constantinople could provide, and adorned with priceless jewels which Romanus and Theodore had managed to procure from the recesses of the Sacred Treasure cell in the Chapel of St. Theodore, behind the Chrysotriklinos.

In casting off the virginal simplicity of Anastasia, the aspirant Theophano had taken on a new bearing along with the change of name. Her manner was that of a queen, and of a queen who was wont to bend all men to her slightest caprice. She took her place in the Imperial circle as if she herself had been born in the Purple Chamber. And even the lovely Agatha, the Princess by her side, seemed more fit to be her lady-in-waiting than her sister-in-law. Never had the Imperial Palace been graced by such dazzling beauty and such royal grace. And even the Autocrator himself, oracle of dignity and behaviour as he was, was bewitched into the pleasant belief that at last his truant son had indeed found a royal lady worthy to continue the race of the Constantines Born-in-the-Purple.

"Approach, royal maiden of the Spartan line," said the easy and affectionate Augustus, enchanted with the beauty and dignity of the girl; "come and kiss thy father that adopts thee, and perform the ceremonial obeisance in use to our Queen, the Augusta, whose daughter thou art to be."

Theophano moved forward gently, with every eye on her steps, radiant and majestic as if Herè were entering the expectant circle of Olympus. During the three months that she had

passed in the palace of the Lord Treasurer, where she had been under the protection of the Lady Euphemia, and had accepted nothing but the ceremonial courtship of the infatuated Prince, Theophano had been carefully trained in all the minutiæ of the etiquette of that most ceremonious of all Imperial courts. Her genius for seduction had made her a consummate mistress of all the graces of a court. And born actress as she was, she went through the ordeal of these formal obeisances with such perfect dignity and charm, that, whilst the whole company were delighted with her bearing, the Emperor himself was in uncontrollable raptures, which his own fine manners could hardly conceal.

To the morbid imagination of the now enfeebled Emperor—whose innermost religion had long been the maintenance not so much of the Empire itself as of the traditions of the Imperial ceremonial—the prospect of a marriage of the youthful Basileus to a magnificent woman, worthy indeed of the Golden Throne, was an event of the first magnitude and of almost divine dispensation. "And thinkest thou, my sweet Basilissa-elect, that thou wilt have strength to comport thyself exactly in all the appointed usages of an Imperial marriage?" said the doting Constantine Born-in-the-Purple, "for it needs the memory of a Proto-Cubicular to go through the ceremonials without a slip, and the majesty of Saint Helena herself, our Imperial ancestress, to bear thyself fitly in that day of days."

"Most August Sovereign Lord and father," softly murmured Theophano, in an attitude of profound reverence, "I have been permitted by her Sacred Majesty's favour to offer up my prayers for help to our most Holy Lady-in-the-Daphne here, and a special assurance has been vouchsafed to me that by her aid I shall be equal to the duties that will devolve on me on that auspicious day."

"Thou shalt hear in the authentic words of the Autocrator himself how the marriage ceremonial of a Basileus is performed," said Constantine, quite roused to infatuation at the prospect of seeing his own Court ritual enacted in his presence. "Send for the reader-in-waiting, and let them bring in the roll of my book on the *Ceremonies in use at Court*. I will have the chapter of 'Royal Marriage' rehearsed this very night in presence of the royal bridegroom and bride that are to be."

The parchment volume, the scribe, and the reader (never far from the side of the Imperial pedant) were at once in attendance.

"Here, here is the passage," cried the feeble despot, foolishly fumbling the pages in his eagerness to turn to his own much-treasured revelations of deportment. "Give me the first book of our *Basileia Taxis*—turn to Chapter xxxix.—on the *Ritual for an Imperial Marriage*. Now read—where we say how the divine service is held in the shrine of Saint Stephen the Protomartyr in our Daphne, and so on."

The reader approached, and amidst profound silence read as follows, the Imperial dotard nodding and smiling feebly to his family as each passage gave him new delight.

"When the Imperial pair have been duly diademed in the Sacred Office, they pass through the Octagon and the Augusteus and by the Golden Hand, and there are received by the magistroi and patricians in the Œnopodium, and the ceremonial procession is formed. The Factions are arranged in the Triclinium on both sides near the steps of the Magnaura. Then the choirs of the two Factions chant 'Long, long, long,' and all respond 'Long, long life: long and for evermore!' Then the solos take it up—'Our Saviour, preserve our Lords: Holy Ghost, protect our Augustas! Sovereign Bridegroom, may God have thee in His holy keeping! May God in heaven give thee grace abounding in thy wedlock! May He who of old time blessed the marriage in Cana bless thy marriage also, and may He visit thy Spouse, so that offspring may be born of thee in the Purple Chamber. This day is a festival of joy to the Roman people, wherein our Lord (Romanus) is espoused to our Lady (Theophano), our most blessed Augusta.' Then the wedded pair pass on to the hall where the Factions are feasted, and again the two choirs renew their chants, singing 'Hail! All hail! Sovereign of the Romans, blessed be thy coming and that of thy consort!' And the people shout, 'Blessings on Thee, joy of the Romans, glory of the Purple; Blessings on Thee, Lady, whom all desire to behold! May God hear the prayers of thy people!' And thence the Wedded Pair proceed to the nuptial alcove, where they lay down their diadems on the bridal bed of state; and thence they pass through the portico to the Hall of the Nineteen Couches, where the Feast is spread."

The younger members of the family now began to show visible signs of fatigue, as the reader poured out the interminable catalogue of salaams, processions, chants, and antiphones prescribed in the Imperial *Manual of Etiquette*. And the exhaustion of the invalid Emperor was so obvious, in spite of his enthusiasm and elation, that the Augusta induced her lord to command the close of the reading and to retire to rest in the Sacred Chamber.

The marriage of the young Basileus Romanus with the illustrious Princess Theophano of Lacedæmon was celebrated with all the splendour of that age of pomp and all the elaborate ceremonial ordained by that most rigid of all Imperial purists. Constantine Porphyrogennetus, who was now become little more than the Grand Master of the Ceremonies in his own

Palace, the veritable "Grand Monarque" and "Roi-Soleil" of the tenth century, seemed to have recovered something of his strength from the supreme satisfaction of seeing one of his own highest functions carried out to perfection in every detail, and by the prospect of an assured succession to the Basilian dynasty in the fruitful marriage of his only son. The birth of another Basil, hereafter to be known as the mighty warrior, "The Slayer of the Bulgarians," was soon followed by that of another Constantine, destined to be eighth Emperor of that glorious name. The Basilian dynasty seemed saved; and the Sacred Palace was the scene of an endless round of magnificent ceremonies, fantastic amusements, incessant scandals, and sinister intrigues.

Marriage, alas! seemed only to have given the young Basileus increased zest for wild sports and scandalous adventures, which were rapidly destroying his health and sapping what was left in him of moral fibre. Now he plunged into the forests of Thrace, now into those of Bithynia to hunt the boar or the bear, exhausting himself in midnight fatigues and exposure to all weathers and seasons. From time to time he was seen in the Tzykanisterion, or polo ground, in the east side of the Palace between the Pharos and the sea-wall. Here the young nobles, having the *entrée*, were wont to engage in polo and other exercises on horseback. This spacious practising ground had been extended and levelled by the Emperor Basil. And here his royal descendant loved to exhibit his prowess as a player in that manly game of polo which the Byzantines had adopted from the Persians. The young Prince had been trained from boyhood in the game by the noble Basil Digenes, who had an hereditary gift for this sport, and who alone was regarded as the match of Romanus. It was no flattery when the best players in the kingdom yielded the victory to the splendid horsemanship and keen eye of the Imperial athlete, whilst the courtiers and ladies of the royal household surveyed the games from arcades of the terrace above. First one and then another of the beauties, who thronged those gay companies, would be chosen by the gallant prince to receive the crown or garland which was the winner's prize; and the vagrant amours of his insatiable fancy gave as much ceaseless gossip to the witty and frivolous Court as ever did a Louis at Versailles or a Charles at Whitehall. Not that the adventures of Romanus were confined in any sense to the Sacred Palace, nor his love-making to maids

of honour or high-born dames. Frolics, sports, orgies, carouses of all kinds—wine, women, mummers, acrobats—all came alike to Romanus with his thirst for excitement and pleasure. Old soldiers and the wary administrators of the Government looked sad and doubtful. But Theophano herself, whose discreetness and virtue had been so fully approved and certified by the Augusta and by the Lady Euphemia, was not seen to complain of or even to perceive the excesses of her boy lord. Indeed, some scandalous old dames, who attended on the aged Empress, Helena, had been heard to insinuate (with much shaking of heads, and many a "My dear—if I only could speak") that Theophano had more than once flung into the arms of her lawful mate a pretty young thing about her own person, who in no way thereby seemed to forfeit her mistress's favour.

CHAPTER V

THE DYING EMPEROR

Constantine Born-in-the-Purple, who, if he had degenerated into a ceremonial martinet, was neither depraved nor idiotic, watched with sorrow and shame the excesses of his only son, though his easy indulgence and his enfeebled will prevented him from interfering to check them. And, steeped as he was in the narcotic poison of a crowd of parasites and sycophants, he had yet too much experience of Empire and of the enormous burdens of its ruler not to turn with a heavy heart to the ominous storm-clouds around his throne. He felt himself dying by inches; and, in spite of the extravagant adulation that formed his daily existence, he had too much sense not to be aware that he was leaving his Empire to a broken and reckless debauchee, his wife and daughters to an ambitious and unscrupulous rival, and the frontiers of his vast dominions a prey to powerful enemies—to the advancing tide of the Prophet, to the savage corsairs, who swept the Ægean Sea and the coasts of Asia, and to the barbarous hordes on the Ister and the Danapris, who hung like avalanches from the northern steppes ready to burst on the plains below. Long and weary were the secret councils which the broken Augustus would hold with minister or general, high priest, philosopher, or monk, whom from time to time he would call to offer him advice.

The Emperor of the Romans at Constantinople, feeble and pedantic as was Constantine himself, was still surrounded by statesmen of great experience and sagacity, who were served by an immense army of trained officials and zealous administrators. This secular organisation kept in life and activity the vast fabric of civilised government which had been built up by a long succession of Constantines, Basils, and Leos; and which was carried back by tradition to the ages of Justinian and Theodosius, even to those of the Antonines and Trajan. It was far in advance of any engine of government then existing on

earth, unless it were for the moment in Andalusia; and it maintained the framework of civilisation and of Imperial administration, at an age when both the Asiatic and the Teutonic polities were in a state of flux and rudiment. The Sovereign Lord of Constantinople still held in subjection the manifold races of his heterogeneous dominion by means, partly of the overwhelming tradition of Roman rule, partly by the mysterious consecration he received from the Orthodox Church, but practically by the instrument of a trained and organised service, both civil and military, much as the Tsar of Russia and the Padishah of Roum have held their kingdoms together in spite of corruption, folly, and intrigue in the court, and at times gross incompetence on the throne itself.

On one day, at the close of Constantine's life and reign—he was now in his fifty-fifth year—nearly all of which time he had been nominally Basileus, the Emperor held a long and anxious privy council with several of his great officers of State. The conclave had been almost forced upon him by the vehement expostulations of the Patriarch, the venerable Polyeuctus. This famous prelate had been brought from his monastery, where his austere piety and zealous spirit had covered him with a halo of sanctity, in order to purge the Holy See from the scandalous extravagances of Theophylact, when that horse-racing Patriarch had been killed by a vicious stallion he had bred. Polyeuctus did not hesitate to rebuke even the Sacred Person of Augustus himself before his whole congregation. And, much as Constantine resented and feared the warnings of the ardent Patriarch, he silently admitted the justice and honesty of the stern monk and fully understood the secret of his unbounded influence. On this occasion the Patriarch was supported by the Patrician, Joseph Bringas, Lord High Admiral and Lord Commander of the Eunuchs; who, eunuch as he was himself, was a man of great intellect and power, and practically the chief authority within the Sacred Palace. He had brought with him to the Imperial Cabinet Sisinnios, one of the proto-spathaires, and Prefect of the City; the proto-secretis, or chief secretary, Theophylact Matzitzikos; and his Honour Judge Joseph, one of the spatharo-candidates, President of the High Court of Justice. These five councillors were all men capable of governing an Empire and fully aware of the perils around it.

The Patriarch began, as was natural from his exalted office, and the fiery nature of the man: "Most August Sovereign, the

critical condition of thy kingdom, and the manifest disorder of thy own household, require thy most serious concern ; and we, thy servants, and servants by thy favour, be it said, of the Most High God, and of this His precious Realm, have come to warn thee, O King, even as the Prophet Samuel gave warning to Saul, and the blessed Saint Paul to Festus. Thy only son, and our future Basileus, is filling this City and thy Sacred Palace with his fooleries, his stage-players, his orgies, and his whoredoms. The woman whom thou gavest him to wife does nothing to restrain his vices. Would that we could see in her any virtues of her own. She wastes the treasures of thy kingdom on effeminate displays and unworthy favourites. She is forming in thy Palace a party who are alien to thee and to thine ; she is seeking to attach to herself the most unscrupulous adventurers she can find, and is manifestly grasping for herself the power of the State. She openly flouts her Sacred Majesty, the Empress, and permits her minions to speak evil of the Princesses, thy honoured daughters. In private she mocks at the sacred offices of the Church and has suffered them to profane the very altar in her private Chapel of Saint Theodore. Chastise her offences, O King, and banish her to a convent in some distant island, or thy son, thy wife, and thy daughters will be made the victims of her jealousy, and thy Golden Throne may be occupied one day by some paramour of her own, whom she has chosen to place in power by her side."

"Forbear, forbear from such awful words," groaned the miserable Emperor, who sat propped up on his cushions and cowering at each blow of the monk's words, as if he was struck with a scourge. "Forbear, most venerable Patriarch, in the name of Christ, our Lord, and the Holy Mother who bore Him. For mercy's sake cease thy maledictions, and tell me how can I, the loving but the dying father of my headstrong son, venture to chastise him as a boy ; and how can I part him from the wife he has chosen to wed, and how tear her down from the high place of state which I have given her myself? Alas! alas!" cried the broken old father, wringing his thin hands as hot tears poured down his emaciated cheeks, "have I not striven to train up my son in every virtue and in princely deportment to make him worthy of the royal part he was to bear? and this, this is the end of all my pains, and my teaching, of the many tutors and my own writings. And she whom I gave him to wife seemed so able to bear all the duties of

Basilissa, and to understand the great part she had assumed. And this is the end of our love and our forethought"—and the poor old man wept bitter tears.

"It is not for me, most August Sovereign," replied the zealous prelate, "it is not for us, the servants of the Most High God, absorbed as we are in sacred things, to offer thee counsel in things of the world; nor am I skilled in devising machinations of policy to deal with sublunary intrigues. This most sagacious counsellor here, the Lord Bringas, or the illustrious Prefect, Sisinnios, can advise thee in such things which belong to their province. 'Tis mine, O King, only by fastings, watchings, and adoration at the altar of God, to receive such warnings as His Mercy vouchsafes to convey to men by the unworthy channel of His anointed priests. And as one of the humblest of these servants of the Most High, I tell thee, Lord Sovereign Augustus, to thy face, thou art harbouring in thy Palace a woman such as thy Imperial ancestors have harboured of old—an Irene, an Eudocia, a Theodora—aye, even such an one as Ahab, King of Israel, once harboured to be the ruin of his kingdom and his house." Constantine quivered, and sobbed in silence. And the Patriarch solemnly folded around him his robe of office, and slowly left the Imperial presence with no visible sign of obeisance, adding only—"I go hence to my place in the Holy Wisdom, to partake of the body and blood of Him in whose sight the kings of the earth are worms and dust. I go to pray for thee, and for this realm and people of Christ."

The Patriarch, whose supreme office and reputation for sanctity placed him for the time on more than an equality with the weak and yet conscientious Emperor, quitted the council, leaving Constantine overwhelmed with his emotions and the other officials somewhat alarmed at such an outburst. At last Joseph Bringas, a real statesman and a man of energy and prudence, ventured to say, "Most August Sovereign, it is not for thy lay servants to answer the accusations which His Holiness, the Patriarch, holds it his duty to deliver to his Sovereign. If the words he has presumed to speak have been put into his heart by God Himself, thy royal wisdom will not fail to judge. For us, mere lay ministers and thy councillors in earthly policy, it is enough to consider what is politic, practicable, and prudent to be done, for the sake of thy Sacred Person, thy family, and thy throne. It is not for us to judge thy royal

son, his Highness the Basileus, but I venture to appeal to his father's heart if his errors are more than the failings of such extreme youth. His natural disposition is excellent and his goodness of heart makes him indulgent to those about him. To put him under restraint would be to light up a civil war: to assail the royal lady, his lawful spouse, would involve a revolution in the Palace which would soon spread to the city. A strong hand to guide his youth, and to check the disorders of thy household, is all that is needed. The favour of your Majesty has given me authority in the past. Extend and continue thy royal favour to thy devoted servant, and with the aid of these councillors here, we will answer for peace and order at home."

"Entrust me with ample authority to arrest and deport any favourite of his Highness who may be organising sedition in the city, and I will answer for the conduct of the Factions at all times," said Sisinnios the Prefect.

"And the Logothete, your Majesty's treasurer," said the chief secretary, "must be authorised to refuse those incessant advances which he is called upon to honour, ostensibly for the ornaments and household of her Royal Highness, but which we have reason to know are being accumulated for a very different object."

"The existence of your Majesty's Empire depends on the rigid administration of the Imperial finances," broke in the Patrician Bringas. "The payment of tribute has been seriously reduced for years past by the ravages of the Moslem invaders on the East, and especially by the corsairs of Crete. But the whole of our seaboard and Asian frontier will be drained of its resources unless we can restore the supremacy of Roman arms, so much shaken by these infidel hordes. Your Majesty has one great soldier in your armies. To him no triumphs are too great to be achieved—a soldier of courage and genius, that may vie with Heraclius, or Narses, or Belisarius himself. Need I say that I mean Nicephorus, the Armenian of the warlike race of Phocas? Place him, O King, at the head of a powerful army and a fleet of equal strength, give him thy Imperial command to restore the supremacy of the Cross, and the Roman name shall be again as great in the two continents as was ever that of Justinian or Theodosius; and Christendom will be rid for ever of the accursed brood of Hagar."

"Well, but this is just what the Lord Akritas of the Eastern

Marches told us," interrupted the distracted Basileus, "when I summoned him to advise us on our policy in the East."

"Most Mighty Sovereign, it is what every real soldier has said for a generation, and what every wise man at home knows to be the truth."

"Have we not made this favourite hero of our armies a Grand Marshal of the Empire, Commander-in-Chief of the Forces of the East? have we not loaded him with honours, appanages, and favours from our throne?"

"And he has won each honour that your Majesty has been pleased to vouchsafe to him, by saving a province or by increasing the Empire," said the Chief Eunuch.

"Nay, but if we place in the hands of this adored general a power so vast, will not ambition prompt him to turn his arms against our dynasty in the person of our too careless son?" asked the ever timid and suspicious Sovereign.

"Nicephorus Phocas," said the Chief Eunuch, "is the soul of loyalty and the mirror of honour. He is as utterly incapable of treason, rebellion, or even disobedience as the Archangel Michael beside the throne of God. Few, indeed, are the trusted officers of your Majesty's armies to whom I would counsel you to confide such paramount authority in arms. Nor indeed, for that matter, would I like to counsel that it be confided to any of your Majesty's servants at home," said Joseph Bringas, as he looked at his colleagues with a significant smile. "I would not advise the bringing home this great soldier from Asia. But Nicephorus Phocas may be trusted to be true to death, whilst he is serving his Sovereign in arms abroad. We may trust him even as we may trust the Saints in heaven."

"And do our trusty councillors here present in audience share the confidence of our most noble Lord Admiral in the loyalty of the Grand Marshal?" asked the Basileus, still hesitating; "are ye all sure that when he possesses the collective forces of our Empire he will still remain servant of the illustrious dynasty that was founded by our mighty ancestor, Basil, of pious and glorious memory?"

"If his power be limited to the armies, and he be occupied in Asia, we are all as sure of it as the Lord Bringas himself," replied the three officials appealed to.

"We will ponder and reflect on your advice," murmured the feeble Sovereign, now thoroughly exhausted both in body and in mind; "we thank you, noble and trusty councillors, for your

attendance upon us and your sage counsels. In the meantime, let the Grand Marshal of our Eastern armies be summoned to the Sacred Palace that we may confer with so illustrious a chief."

Nicephorus Phocas was duly summoned by Imperial messenger with the official dispatch sealed with the vermilion cypher, but he never saw his punctilious and procrastinating Master.

Constantine Porphyrogennetus was now dying. Enfeebled by internal disease, he was exhausted by chronic fevers, for which his physicians prescribed the baths of Prusa in Bithynia. The medicinal waters rather aggravated his malady, and he turned from earthly to spiritual resources, visiting the monasteries around Mount Olympus, carried in his golden litter from cell to cell whilst he shared the watches, the services, the pallet of the most famous anchorites, joining in their prayers, hymns, and prostrations. All was in vain. He was borne down to the shore of the Marmora, whence the royal dromon, or galley, conveyed him by an easy transport to the Sacred Palace.

It was a cold and dreary November when the mighty Augustus was for the last time carried back to the *hieros koitôn*, or Imperial bedchamber, the magnificence of which seemed to mock the helplessness of the sinking potentate. The Patriarch was summoned with his acolytes to administer the last offices of religion according to the rites of the orthodox Church. The venerable Augusta sank down exhausted with grief and anxiety. The Princesses were gathered round their father's couch, and Agatha, the youngest, was bending over him with incessant care to smooth his pillow and moisten his lips. The monarch in his expiring moments asked for his son. But no son was there. The reckless Romanus had gone off with a gay retinue of courtiers to hunt in the forests on the Asian side of the Bosphorus, and all the messengers had failed to meet him. The eunuchs of the royal chamber, the chief physician, and his Holiness, the Patriarch, watched the last agony of the Sovereign. At a sign from the physician who held the pulse of the dying man, the Chief Eunuch of the chamber closed the eyes and covered the face of the dead.

Then, with a loud voice which rang through the awe-struck and silent chamber, the Patriarch, Polyeuctus, sprang from his knees, and, raising aloft the crucifix, he cried, "Go forth hence, O King; the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, has called thee to Himself."

At these thrilling words the Princess Agatha shrieked aloud, and the venerable Augusta fainted. The other Princesses flew to aid their mother: Zoe, the eldest, cried aloud for the ladies-in-waiting to carry the Augusta to her own bedchamber, the sacred apartment of the Empress regnant.

But here the door of that chamber was flung open and Theophano stood in the entrance like some fierce and majestic fury presiding over a scene of carnage. She was surrounded by her own chamberlains, eunuchs, and ladies of honour. "Bear not the widow hither, I command ye. There is no Augusta here but one—and I am your Basilissa to-day. The chamber of the Empress is for me, and I share it with no relict of the dead. Here, carry off your late King to prepare him for the tomb. This Sacred *Koitôn* is for my Lord, Romanus, second of that auspicious name, most mighty and illustrious Basileus of the Romans. In his name I charge ye, get ye all gone from hence."

Appalled by this sudden apparition, as if it had been some evil spirit issuing from the depths of hell, and yet well aware of all that might be brought about by the waywardness of Romanus and the malice of Theophano, the family and retinue of the dead Sovereign shrank away in tears and groans beneath the triumphant smiles of the new Augusta and the mocking menaces of the attendants she had brought.

CHAPTER VI

THE CORONATION

It was just daybreak on a bright morning of the year 960 A.D., near the Hebdomon barracks, outside the walls of Constantinople; and a general movement towards the city could be seen on the shores of the Propontis. The sun was newly risen over the eastern hills, and was reflected in the smooth water of that inland sea. The harbour and shore were covered with gay sailing vessels and boats hurrying towards the city, of which the walls and towers were some three miles distant. From the circular castle of Cyclobion, half a mile nearer the city, were pouring forth masses of troops, both horse and foot, which were being marshalled in the broad exercising ground that lay between Hebdomon and the city walls. At this moment two officers in resplendent array, mounted on light Arab chargers and followed by orderlies and grooms, issued from the huge gateway of the fortress, and crossed the drawbridge into the road that led to the Golden Gate.

Both warriors wore the gilded cuirasses, greaves, and armlets of the Imperial Guard; their long lances and embossed shields were borne by their attendants. The elder, a dark and bronzed Armenian of mature age, was leading the way and explaining the concourse to his companion, an athletic fair-haired youth from Norway. In truth, the young and noble Eric had been driven from his home by the conquering Dane, and had just found his way to friends amongst the Varangian Guard to take service with the Byzantine Cæsar. His birth, reputation, and skill in arms had gained him a warm welcome, and Bardas Skleros, who was one of the veteran generals of the Eastern army, had taken him into favour and made him his aide-de-camp. To-day, the long-anticipated date fixed for the consecration of the new Basileus, Bardas had promised the Norwegian tyro to show him the capital and the army which he had just joined, and to introduce him at Court in person. The young

hero, to whom all this splendour, pomp, and array was a dazzling novelty, strove hard not to betray by a look his wonder and admiration; whilst the politic chief sought in every way to arouse his curiosity and to fill his rude mind with a fitting awe.

As they rode past the long ranks of troops waiting their orders to join in the procession, each company and squadron in various equipments and from different nations, Bardas was received with salutes and cheers from the men whom he had often led to battle.

"These are our Dyrrhachian Highlanders," said the general, as they passed the huge mountaineers from the Dalmatian coast in their rough capotes and short claymores; "and next to them are companies from the Peloponnesian Islands. Next come the Patzinak foreigners, who have volunteered for service under our standard. See those giants there: they are Russ, who, dissatisfied with their own Tsar, have taken the oath to our lord."

"Are they all of different race, costume, weapon?" said the puzzled lad, "for they seem to speak different tongues—not one of which can I understand or name."

"Yes!" said the Bardas; "for the ceremony of to-day they are purposely chosen from the various nations which fill our armies. All are Romans, all are sworn to die for our Sovereign and August Basileus. But he never asks them to forsake their own tongue, nor their own accoutrements and arms, nor any of the habits to which they have been bred. Each company has its own chief and interpreter, and the word of command is given in the speech they love."

"Are they not all even worshippers of the Cross?" said the pious Eric as he devoutly crossed himself; "are they not so much as baptised?"

"Cæsar," said the general, with a dry smile, "is proud to know that they serve him with loyal faith to the last breath of their life. He knows that their souls are safe if they die in his service, for his service is the defence of the Church and the Cross. They have had their baptism of blood, and in good time they will have their baptism of water. Besides," he muttered between his teeth, "since these gallant fellows never converse with other regiments, they have no temptation to mutiny or intrigue. And since many of them have no occasion to call in a priest, they are never disturbed in mind by anything that happens in Church or State.

"The soldier of Rome," said Bardas, with a keen look into the eyes of his young friend, "has nothing to do with politicians or with monks. Discipline, obedience, fidelity, make up his whole duty to God and man. His religion is to serve Rome and its divine Autocrator!" Here a shout of welcome and a crashing salute of more than ordinary vigour surprised the young Norwegian, who noticed the gleam of pride that lighted up the general's face. "Aye," said Bardas, "these are my own Armenians, the brigade I raised in my native mountains; did you ever see more likely-looking men-at-arms?"

And now, as they drew up near the walls, they saw the splendid array of the Varangian host, into which Eric had just been admitted, with their scale coats of mail, and their terrific battle-axes, drawn up in line around the Golden Gate of triumph.

At last the young Scandinavian beheld that mighty range of fortifications stretching for some three miles from the Propontis to the Golden Horn—those historic walls of Constantinople, which for a thousand years defied the onslaught of a series of invaders. The land walls of the city are still, even in their abandonment and ruin, the most impressive monument of its military skill that the ancient world has left us. In the tenth century they rose in three distinct lines of circumvallation, with broad causeways between each line, and in front an immense moat more than sixty feet broad and some twenty feet deep. Each of the three lines of ramparts, which rose in increasing height, one behind the other, was surmounted by battlements; the two inner lines being strengthened by towers, also crowned with battlements and pierced with narrow embrasures. The towers of the wall rose to a height of fifty feet above the outer *peribolos*, or terrace, which separated the second from the outer wall. The last defence, the huge inmost wall, rose to a height of forty feet from the broad terrace which separated it from the middle wall. It had ninety-six tremendous towers at distances of one hundred and eighty feet apart, which rose to a height of sixty feet above the terrace and thus were about one hundred feet above the level of the moat. The great inner wall was fifteen feet thick, faced with blocks of limestone on its outer and inner face. The entire transverse width of this complicated fortification, not counting the moat, from the outer wall to the inside of the inmost line, measured about one hundred and fifty feet. In height the serried line of towers

rose to ninety feet above the surrounding country and also above the level of the city within.

The young barbarian could no longer restrain his emotions of wonder and enthusiasm. He reined in his charger and stood awe-struck at the sight of such a fortress; and, falling back to his native tongue, muttered some broken exclamations in a mixture of creeds about Odin, Asgard, Walhalla, and the Mother of God. The wily chief eyed his young charge with inward satisfaction.

"We shall have ample time to study the fortifications on some other day; and you shall soon be instructed in all the means of defence they possess. Some day you shall attend the rampart drill, and see how the troops are trained to rush along the level terrace from tower to tower, how the successive lines of defence are manned: how, from the battlements above, the engines of war are arrayed which pour bolts, stones, molten lead, and our Greek fire on any invader who might be rash enough to come within their range."

Eric mused in silence. He had seen the log stockades of his native land: and had known them drenched in blood and crackling with fire as they fell before a fierce attack. He had borne arms within the circular pallisades on the Vistula and the Danube, which the Slavs and the Bulgarians styled their capitals and royal cities. He had even been a prisoner in Kiev, the renowned city of the Russ, of which the fame had spread up the Baltic, and through the whole Scandinavian peninsula. But these were but the fastnesses of savages compared with the vast and scientific circumvallations which protected the capital and palace of the Cæsars.

"The rebel angels might as well hope to scale the Heaven and Throne of the Almighty," said the chief; "but let us hasten on to the Court and the Sacred Palace, for you may expect to see greater wonders to-day."

The horsemen rode on amidst the tramp of various troops advancing to take up their positions in the city, and crowds of country people from the neighbouring villages who were hurrying to see the show. And now the chief pointed out to his companion the beautiful "Golden Gate," outside of which was posted a company of Varangians. This noble monument, of which we see the ruin built up into the Turkish fort of the "Seven Towers," was a triumphal arch of the great Theodosius,

but now incorporated in the mighty circumvallations constructed by his grandson. It was wholly of marble, upheld by lofty classical columns, and at this date was still in perfect preservation. The royal gate was reserved for the Emperor and his special guests, and, of course, was now closed and guarded. Our horsemen passed into the city through the public gate that adjoined, along with the troops and the crowd.

Once within the city they pressed on along the *Via triumphalis* that ran parallel to the sea, a course of some four miles to the Golden Palace and the Augusteum. The great street was lined with palaces, churches, colonnades, and public buildings, the windows and balconies being festooned with draperies and coloured curtains, and the roadway strewn with bright sand, and enlivened with flowers and wreaths of myrtle, rosemary, and laurel. They hastened past the Forum of Arcadius, with its column, one hundred and fifty-eight feet high, surrounded by bas-reliefs of battle scenes in imitation of the column of Trajan at Rome. Thence they passed to the Forum of Theodosius, and so on through ever-increasing crowds to the Middle Street (Mesè) and the Forum of Constantine. This splendid area, in shape an ellipse, surrounded by two tiers of porticoes, with a marble arch at either end, was adorned with public buildings, monuments, statues, and crosses ; in its centre the Porphyry Column, which still remains in its ruined state in the heart of the city. In the tenth century it was uninjured and surmounted with the statue of the venerable founder of New Rome. The chief explained to the awe-struck Viking the story of this sacred symbol ; and the simple youth remained dumb with astonishment before such signs of magnificence and power. As he passed countless palaces, porticoes, churches, statues, and memorials he was made dizzy with the infinite multitudes in the crowd ; and his martial ardour was roused by the sight of the various troops of horse and foot which occupied the entire line, and restrained the eagerness of the mob.

At the Forum of Constantine the two horsemen alighted, gave their chargers to the attendants, and proceeded on foot to the Augusteum. Here the crowds were more dense, the adornments of the streets more brilliant, and the array of troopers more solid. At sight of the chief and his companion, all barriers were removed, and the military lines were opened ; and with throngs of officials, priests, and nobles in gala attire, the general and his aide strode on till they reached the great open

space, south of the vast church and fronting the bronze gateway of the Sacred Palace.

"This mighty fane before us," said Bardas to his friend, "is the Metropolitan Church of the Divine Wisdom, built by Justinian the Great, more than four hundred years ago. It outshines all temples of God in the world both in size and beauty, as the Roman Empire outshines all other States. These statues and monuments in the Forum around are the precious gifts of a line of beneficent princes. That glorious equestrian statue in the centre of the square is our ever-to-be-venerated Emperor Justinian of immortal memory. And opposite is the bronze gateway that leads into the corridors of the Sacred Palace. Follow me, my son, and try to wear a look of less amazement and confusion at what you see. I have obtained permission from the Parakeimomenos himself that you shall be in attendance on me to-day in the Palace, and the procession that will shortly be formed."

They passed in at the gorgeous gates of gilt bronze amidst salutes by the Imperial Guard and reverences by the ushers addressed to the general; and wandered at leisure from court to court, along the corridors and porticoes, filled with marble and bronze statues, adorned with mosaic pictures, and now hung with tapestries and Eastern embroideries. The vast halls and cloisters were crowded with nobles and officials in robes of state, and the higher chiefs of the army in their most splendid uniforms and jewelled arms. Gradually they joined the gay crowd, as it gathered up to form the procession from the sacred apartments within. At last, three ringing blasts from the silver trumpets summoned the ranks to close, and the formal ceremonial of the day began.

First came a company of Varangians—stately warriors from the North—Scandinavians, Russians, Saxons, with long limbs and flaxen or red hair—the Imperial bodyguard, in gilt mail tunics, armlets, and greaves, carrying the peculiar weapon of their country, the huge battle-axe surmounted by a sickle-shaped halberd. Then came a group of ushers and Palace officers in splendid civil garb. Next followed the Court officials in their due order of precedence—Silentiaries, Chamberlains, Masters of the Robes and Masters of the Horse, High Stewards, Court Eunuchs, and Privy Councillors, grooms of the chamber, and dispensers of the royal largesses, the Chancellor, and the Logothete, or Minister of Finance.

A fresh company of guards—these from the Eastern cavalry—separated this part of the procession from the rest. Then came an almost interminable procession of priests, each bearing huge wax tapers, choristers, acolytes, and incense-bearers, with a long array of crosses, *ikons*, and holy emblems. The priests were in their bright robes of high ceremony, embroidered copes, charged with long palls bearing the Greek cross on each fold. The choristers chanted a psalm as they passed on, and the incense-bearers swung their silver censers; and as the miraculous *ikons* passed, the privileged spectators, by whom the courts were lined, bowed to the earth in reverence of each holy emblem. At last a fresh group of priests bore along the True Cross of Saint Helena, or rather the portion of it enclosed in an enamelled and jewelled cross of solid silver, the miracle-working rod of Moses, the girdle and veil of the Mother of God, and the portrait of Christ, "not made by human hands," which had been vouchsafed to men on earth. All these were received with profound reverences from the spectators in their stations as they were borne along amidst the glitter of the tapers and the perfume of incense.

And now came a third group, headed by Grooms of the Chamber, Lords-in-Waiting, and Masters of the Household, all in flowing robes of embroidered silk, of various colour and pattern. At last, stalked by himself, the observed of all beholders, who cringed and cowered before him, the Parakeimomenos himself, the Eunuch Joseph, the Lord High Chamberlain, and President of the Imperial Privy Council, who was practically the real ruler of the Empire. Then came a pause, and a hush of expectation. And lastly there advanced, headed by a further company of guards, tawny mountaineers from the Anatolian Theme, and by a band of musicians with trumpets, cymbals, drums, and fifes, the new Basileus and Basilissa themselves.

Romanus II. was arrayed in a corselet and armlets of gold over his purple tunic, which shone with jewels and pearls; and from his shoulders hung the long folds of the Imperial *scaramangion*. His legs had already been fitted with the quaint scarlet boots, or leggings, which were the ensign of an emperor. His scabbard was scarlet, enamelled and jewelled. He wore on his brow a fillet with precious amulets, but as yet no crown. For the crown was borne along beside him by Polyeuctus, the venerable Patriarch, supported and assisted by the prelates of his cathedral in their most gorgeous robes of office. Behind

the Basileus, in a dazzling group of Court beauties, Ladies-in-Waiting, of Mistresses and Ladies of the Robes, came the new Basilissa herself, in a tunic of silk gauze of the hues of the rainbow, covered with full robes of massive embroideries, and blazing with precious stones, pearls, and pendants. Pride, joy, hope, beamed from the lovely countenance of the Empress, and was reflected as it were in that of the Emperor. As they passed slowly along the corridors, courts, and colonnades, the privileged spectators, who lined them, broke forth at the bidding of the silentiary, or usher, with fervid cries of "Many, many happy years!" "Holy! Holy! Holy! Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth! To our Great Basileus and Autocrator Romanus, many years of life!" And as the Empress passed, again they chanted thrice, "Long life to our blessed Augusta, welcome Theophano, may God keep thee, most pious lady of our Sovereign Lord!" It may be doubted if Romanus II. was the most glorious Emperor of his mighty line, and yet more if Theophano were the most pious of royal princesses; but this is certain, that in all that concourse of brilliant men and lovely women in the wonderful panorama of that crowded day, in all that Empire which stretched from far Calabria to the Chersonnesus, from the Adriatic to the Caucasus and the Euphrates, there could be found no more brilliant figure than that of the young Romanus—and no such dazzling beauty as that of the Greek Theophano herself.

A space separated the Imperial group from the rest of the *cortège*. Then in gorgeous robes of samite, embroidered in gold thread, advanced alone the huge form of Basil, the Eunuch, the royal bastard, now Grand Master of the Ceremonies. He was followed by a group of general officers in their most splendid uniform of parade. All eyes were now turned upon the illustrious chief, who stalked on in front of the line—the Generalissimo of the Oriental armies—the first soldier of the Empire.

"See, the hero comes," said Bardas Skleros in a whisper to Eric, as the adored chief turned a friendly glance on his trusty comrade and a piercing look on his athletic attendant, who now took their places in the brilliant group of officers of the staff. Nicephorus Phocas, the most eminent chief of a long line of Armenian nobles, the most heroic warrior of a family of famous men of war, was now in the flower of his strength, at forty-six years of age. His natural olive complexion had been tanned and burnt almost to a dark hue in the incessant campaigns he

had fought since his boyhood amid the suns of Mesopotamia and the snowy passes of Cilicia. He wore his hair long and flowing, with a crisp beard just beginning to be tinged with grey. His nose was long and aquiline, his eyes were dark, of an intense fire under a penthouse of thick black eyebrows. Of middle height, he had the trunk and shoulders of a giant, with abnormal depth of chest and the long muscular arms with which he had more than once in battle cleft a mailed enemy to the chine. His look was stern and pensive, lighted up at moments, as it were, with a sombre fire within. He was taciturn and immovable by habit, so that hardly a gesture or a look ever betrayed his purpose or his thought. To-day he stalked on alone, his mind far away from the Sacred Palace, with neither comrade nor lieutenant by his side ; and he just acknowledged with his hand the cheers and obeisances with which he was received. It was noticed that he alone of all that brilliant throng had chosen to attend the procession in his well-worn tunic and his close helm and corselet of action, in the same accoutrements and arms in which he was wont to appear in many a bloody field. And as his scrutiny fell on the warlike figure of Eric, the young Scandinavian felt a thrill to the marrow of his bones ; and to his fantastic Northern imagination it seem to him that Odin himself was searching him with a look to judge if the lad were yet worthy to enter into the Walhalla of heroes.

Slowly the immense procession passed on to the royal gate, where the Emperor mounted his cream-coloured charger of the purest stock of Arabia, richly caparisoned with jewelled and golden ornaments. When the Augusteum was reached—the Forum in front of the Palace bounded by Hagia Sophia and the Hippodrome—the Basileus was received by an immense crowd of privileged and official spectators, who again raised the chant of "Long, long life and happy years to our Augustus and Autocrator!" Here was renewed the ancient ceremony of ages, dating from the time when Cæsar was the true commander-in-chief. Romanus dismounted and was raised on an immense shield, upborne by general officers, the heads of the Senate and the Palace, and even nominally by the Patriarch himself; and, amidst volleys of cheers—"Long life and happy years!"—from the vast throng in the porticoes and terraces around, he was saluted as Cæsar, even as Trajan, Constantine, and Theodosius had been hailed by the army as successors of Julius and Augustus.

This secular ceremony accomplished, the Basileus and Basilissa with their trains ascended the staircase which led to their place in the Hippodrome. In due order they appeared in the *cathisma*, or raised balcony, at the northern or straight end of the vast circus, which for hours had been filled by an immense concourse of citizens. As the Imperial pair in their gorgeous array appeared at the rail in front of their lofty balcony, the sight was one that struck dumb the raw Norwegian halberdier, and would profoundly impress even the most experienced sightseer of modern times. On each side of the long Hippodrome there rose tier after tier on the marble steps, crowned with open colonnades, a gathering of at least one hundred thousand spectators. In their proper places were seated the Factions, now organised and recognised political clubs. On the city side were seated in proper uniform the Green Faction, on the sea side were the Blues, and from ten thousand trained voices, at the bâton of their "leaders," and at the word "Salute!" there broke forth, time after time, and in answering strophe and antistrophe, the ordained chant, "Long life and happy years to our Augustus and Autocrator, Romanus"—"Holy! Holy! Holy! Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth!" The Cæsar descended: and, on this occasion, by special favour, as he was proud of his beauty and his consummate horsemanship, Romanus rode in state on his cream charger round the entire arena. As he passed each block of the enormous throng he was received with deafening cheers and the eternal chant of "Long life and happy years!" He was now disrobed from the stately *dibetesion* and *scaramangion*, and had chosen to exhibit his exquisite limbs in the uniform of a cataphractic trooper in full campaigning equipment. And as he careered round the long Hippodrome, curveting on his fiery Arab, the superstitious Byzantine burghers imagined that they saw the blessed Saint George himself.

When he was returned to the *cathisma* aloft and had taken his seat on the throne, which stood high above the gates whence the chariots started, the Basileus signed to the Parakeimomenos that it was his wish for the games to begin. The marshals and heralds now cleared the racecourse; and four chariots of four horses each were shot forth from the *carceres*. The race was followed with shouts, yells, and screams of excitement by the vast host in the circus. More races ensued, and displays of various strange beasts from Asia and from Africa; camels, elephants, giraffes, ostriches, and lions were paraded round the

ring. And deputations from wild frontier tribes in strange outlandish costumes advanced to pay reverence and offer gifts to the Cæsar—naked Nubians, seamen from far Dalmatia, Vikings from the Baltic, Russ exiles and outlaws, and hillmen from the Caucasus in huge sheep-skins and with bows and arrows.

The shows in the Hippodrome were continued long after the Basileus and Basilissa had left their thrones in the *cathisma*. This day of most exhausting ceremonies had yet to receive its final and most important function, in the solemn consecration of the Imperial pair in the cathedral church by the Patriarch. The Emperor again crossed the Augusteum to the portal of the great church. He had now been relieved of his military array, and had been formally arrayed in the gorgeous robes of Imperial state, brocaded with gold, gems, and quaint devices. At the entrance to Hagia Sophia the Basileus was received by the Patriarch and all his clergy; and whilst his Steward of the Largesse presented gifts to the holy places, the Emperor, the Empress, and all their principal attendants were supplied with lighted tapers with which they entered the *narthex*. They were conducted into the vestry, where fresh robings took place, and even some refreshments were offered to the exhausted princes. After a short rest the sacred ordinances of the ceremony began. Emperor and Empress in turn duly prostrated themselves before the holy images, crosses, and emblems, and devoutly kissed the miraculous *ikon*. The procession advanced to the centre of the mighty dome, the choir chanting hymns and repeating "Holy! Holy! Holy! Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth!" and the ushers and prelates placed the royal personages on the thrones prepared for them. The Patriarch himself, in the *bema*, or chancel, within the semi-circular apse, opened the stated prayers, and the coronation liturgy was chanted, the close of each invocation being marked by the chant of the choristers. Advancing from the chancel to the *ambon*, the Patriarch caused the Gospel of the day to be read out, and again he uttered the prayers of the rubric. This *ambon* was a raised platform of coloured marble, surmounted by short columns, supporting a canopy of alabaster and mosaic. It was reached by a flight of marble steps, both on the eastern and the western sides, and formed a kind of stage between the chancel, or apse, and the centre of the great dome; and it served at once as reading station and stand for important ceremonies. Hither

the Basileus was led by one range of stairs, the Patriarch standing at the opposite end, and the crown being held beside him. The crown itself was perfumed with incense, and blessed by the Patriarch by placing his hands on it. Then, summoning the Emperor to his side, the Patriarch raised the crown aloft, and solemnly placed it on the head of the Basileus, crying, "Holy! God in Three! bless our August Autocrator and Basileus!" Then the Basilissa was led forth by her attendant eunuchs and borne up into the *ambon*, where the Emperor himself placed her crown on his consort's head. They both then were attended to their thrones in front of the chancel, and the rest of the ceremony was concluded, the Patriarch having now returned from the *ambon* to the *bema*.

There he celebrated mass himself and partook of the elements in solemn form. Thereupon the Basileus was led into the *bema* and stood beside the silver altar. His crown is taken from his head and held by the chief deacon, whilst the Basileus on his knees partakes of the body and blood of Christ. The Patriarch again blesses him and anoints him with holy oil; and cries over his bowed head: "May the Lord be mindful of the power of thy kingdom in His Universal Kingdom, now and always for ever and ever, Amen." Thereupon the Emperor stooped low, and thrice kissed the hand of the Patriarch, and remained in silent prayer, amidst a breathless pause. At last the Autocrator rose, and was led to his throne beside the Empress. And at once the choir burst forth with the peals of the organ, and the blare of silver trumpets, and the chants of the choir in the galleries were renewed. The Imperial procession was re-formed. Hundreds of pendant chandeliers held lighted candles and glass lamps. The incense poured upwards in wreaths to the saints, archangels, and cherubim in the mosaics of the domes, and amidst a blaze of colour and the rustlings of a thousand robes of silk and brocade, the Imperial *cortège* passed into the open square. As they issued from the portal, a roar of voices ascended from the crowd without, with renewed shouts of "Long life and happy years to Romanus and Theophano! Augustus ever victorious and Augusta beloved of the Mother of God!"

The Imperial procession, with its multitude of officials, soldiers, eunuchs, and priests, passed into the bronze gates of the Palace amidst infinite acclamations, the murmur of a vast mass of excited human beings and the incessant strains of

martial music. They proceeded to the hall of the *excubitors* (or bodyguard), where a banquet of three hundred guests was held. The Basileus and Basilissa themselves were conducted, with a series of obeisances and forms, to the privy chambers of the Sacred Palace, where, after a fitting rest, they supped in the Hall of the Nineteen Couches with the Patriarch and a few of the highest officials of the Empire.

CHAPTER VII

THE CONFESSION

The young Viking had been dismissed from his attendan on General Bardas; and stunned as he had been by the noise and marvellous sights of the day, his senses reeling from the fumes of the incense, and his eyes aching from the incessant panorama he had witnessed, he ventured to enter the great temple alone that he might recall his thoughts from the whirl in which they swam. The crowd had left the building; a few sacristans here and there were extinguishing the last lights; the air within was heavy with the scent of flowers and incense. The young soldier raised his eyes from the checkered floor to the walls resplendent with the most magnificent marbles cut from the Eastern and African quarries, and thence to the enormous monoliths crowned with capitals of intricate work of acanthus and vine leaves. He little understood the nature of the mighty dome under which he stood: still less, how the marvellous pictures in gold and coloured glass which filled the vaults had been made. To his untutored eye, the figures of the Archangel Michael, of the Mother of God, and of the Saviour of Mankind seemed to him miraculous appearances of these sacred and divine beings in their proper persons. Fainting under the sense of superstitious terror, exhausted in body and mind by all the excitements of the day, the young Norwegian, whom neither man nor brute had ever dismayed for an instant, sank down beneath an *ikon* in a dark corner of the aisle, and striving in vain to utter a few coherent prayers, he bowed himself to earth, muttering, "God, be merciful to one of the least of Thy servants!"

How long he remained in this posture he never knew. But when coherent thought returned to him again, he saw by a dim lamp two men in a distant corner of the aisle: one a priest in his seat of confession, the other a bronzed veteran wrapped in a long military cloak on his knees before the man of God.

The Confession

The priest was a young monk, whose emaciated face bore witness to a life of austere sacrifice. The warrior bore the look of the illustrious *Stratelatos*—Nicephorus Phocas—a look which no man who had ever seen it could forget.

The young soldier was thunderstruck to see at such a moment, in such a place, and with such a look, the chief whom he believed to be within the Sacred Palace in the place of honour at the coronation feast. The mighty general was on his knees before the monk ; his proud countenance was now wrung with remorse and some dark purpose within his mind. To Eric's heated imagination it seemed as if he had intruded on some hallowed scene, as if he were watching his Saviour in the Garden of Gethsemane awaiting His hour of Passion. The guardsman stole away in the gloom of the side aisles, muttering prayers to all the Saints whose names and offices he knew or could remember.

A severe struggle was indeed passing between the anchorite and the general—a critical moment in the life of the mighty commander of the Eastern armies. The monk, Abraham, had been commended to Nicephorus by his venerated uncle, Maleinos. The monk was now known as Athanasius. His eloquence, zeal, and saintly character had deeply impressed Nicephorus, who held him in profound veneration. This monk was the sole confessor of the general.

"Holy father," he was saying in a hoarse whisper, "I have lived from youth upwards as a man of war, to which I was bred by my father and my grandfather of noble memory ; and, if I have done deeds of blood, it was in obedience to the orders of my commanders and of our Lord the Basileus. But Christ has said that they who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. I have always hoped to die in some glorious field, my sword red with the blood of followers of the False Prophet. But now I, who never feared mortal men, tremble to think of myself as standing at the Judgment Seat of a God of Love and Mercy. I feel at last—too late, alas !—how a life such as mine has dishonoured the Gospel of Christ. And if He spare me a few years longer, they will be too short to wipe out my sins by penance, and groans, and the solitary life of a hermit. Father, I have come to ask from thee a blessing, and thy good word to the monks of Saint Demetrius on Olympus, whither I am about to withdraw for ever to a cell."

"My son," replied the monk, "if God has given thee success

as a soldier, it was to serve some wise purpose of His own. Thou hast neither that humility nor that patience which it becomes an eremite to possess, and without which all penances and prayers are in vain. Thou art too old to learn our hard and cheerless way of life. Thou hast no experience of the raptures of the soul when it communes with the beings above in glory. Thou art not the stuff of which saints are made or with which the saints can hold converse."

"Ask my troopers," said the hero proudly, "if I have not lived a life as hard as any hermit of Mount Athos!"

"And of humility, and peace, and meditation such as theirs?" said the monk, with a gentle sadness that entirely covered the sarcasm of his question.

"Show me how I can humble myself more than I do at this hour, at the feet of thee and of Christ. It is peace that I ask. And as to meditation—how often in the watches of the night, in the tented field, have I lain awake seeking the Lord and His blessed Saints, till I had a vision of the Babe smiling in His mother's arms, and I knew by that sign that in the morning I should win a new fight for the Cross."

"Aye, Christ means thee to win yet other fights in His name, for the peril of the Cross was never greater than it is now. But how comest thou to be here at this hour? Will not the Basileus and his courtiers mark thy absence from the feast and accuse thee of treason against the throne?"

"Does Nicephorus Phocas care for the yelping of these parasites and eunuchs? Is he anything to-day to the Basileus himself, or to the crowds in the Golden Palace? Can you think that the Basileus is troubled at his absence—aye—or the . . . the . . . the he-women or the she-men who prowl about the Imperial *koitôn?*" he added at last after a broken sentence, wherein he seemed to choke down some words that rose to his lips.

"I know of many she-men in that court, but of only one he-woman," said the subtle priest, suddenly catching at a new thought and casting on the soldier a piercing glance. "What! has the proud Basilissa dared to affront the first soldier of the Empire, and maddened him to forswear the service of his Majesty in his wrath? I thought a Phocas was of too stern a mould to be goaded or turned from his duty by the insolence of a spoiled beauty!"

"Father, it is done. And neither man nor woman in the

Court will miss Nicephorus or wonder at his absence. I have sent a trusted messenger to the Lord High Chamberlain to beg from his Sacred Majesty permission to retire from all my offices and leave to enter a hermitage. And his Lord High Eunuchship will take good care that his Majesty grants my prayer. That is how I come to be here. My Sovereign Lord, Romanus, will be glad to be rid of his gloomy commander-in-chief, and our Sovereign Lady Theophano will jest about the surly monster in the blood-stained tunic as she is unrobing with her maids of honour; and she will finish the epigram she was beginning to-day."

"What! did she address thee in public?"

"She beckoned me towards her side as the procession was forming, and called out so loud that the wife of Lord Demetrius and others could hear—'Wear not so gloomy a countenance for my sake, Lord Commander of the Eastern Themes, or our loyal Byzantines will fly from the sight of thee, as they say the Hagarenes so often fly when thy plume is to the front!' These were her very words—I hear them ringing in my ears—and then she smiled on me the smile that no man forgets."

"And is it possible that the 'Terror of the Hagarene,' as they truly name thee, will suffer the idle word of a woman to turn his life, to break the keenest sword in Christendom, if not to put in peril this Empire of Rome and of Christ?"

"Father, I tell thee it is done. My life as a layman is ended. My surrender of office is already in the hands of our Autocrator. I am no longer a soldier. I am a postulant for the holy life—in what remains to me on this earth," he muttered with a deep sigh.

"Nicephorus, my son in God," said the monk, with a solemnity that was almost stern, "thou art hiding the truth from thy father confessor. To mislead the priest in confession is to seek to mislead God Himself. And He who reads all thoughts and sees to the heart of man will surely avenge the insult to His servant who is betrayed in his holy office. Nicephorus, I charge thee, in the name of the Mother of God, hide not the truth from me as thou canst not hide it from God. Thou art bewitched by a woman! Who has seduced thee to sin?"

"Father, as I live by bread, I have never sinned with woman, nor has woman ever sinned with me. My sins, as God knoweth, are sins of violence, and wrath, and blood, and pride—but of love never, of lust of the flesh nothing, aye, of self-indulgence,

I may say without a boast, not an hour since I first grew a beard. Monk, I tell thee, that of woman I am as pure as thou—aye," he added with a bitter word, "much more worthy of the crown of virginity than are many monks of East and of West."

"Nicephorus Phocas, palter not with words in this sacred office," rejoined the monk, now rising to stern authority in exercise of his divine mandate, and addressing the great soldier with such power as he himself was wont to use in giving his orders on the field; "I said, thou art bewitched by a woman. Again I ask thee, in confession, what woman has bewitched thee so to change thy life?"

The chief answered not a word. But he sank down flat on the marble pavement; and lay prostrate, writhing in agony, and shame, and despair, his huge limbs convulsed, and his powerful hands clinched in his passion. A long silence ensued, hardly broken by the sobs and groans of the chief, as his frame was shaken with a tumult of emotions.

"God gives me no right to grant His absolution till the truth is confessed and penance is prescribed," said the monk at last in measured and solemn tones; and he waited till the storm of feeling had grown calm.

"Holy father," said the chief at last, rising from the pavement, but still on his knees, his head bowed down, and his hands clasped under him, speaking in a low and broken voice, "my sin is in thought, as yet known only to God and to my heart. I have done no act of wrong: I will do no act of wrong. But I am consumed with a fire within me, and I must be far away from this city of sin—this Palace of folly and lust and vanity—this pandemonium of eunuchs, pimps, and pandars. I must flee from this woman—this new Theodora—this second Irene. The thought of her haunts me day and night. When she first began to mock the battered warrior, whose grisly boar's head, she said, might well be used to frighten the Hagarene babies when they whined, a thrill went through me—no! not of pain or anger—no! not of shame, no! rather of pleasure. I found myself waiting in the portico where she would take the air with her girls and creatures, and she would pinch my rough cheek and call me Vulcan, looking herself indeed the Goddess of Beauty as fabled by those pagan poets that the courtiers still love to recite."

"Well! why this to me?" broke in the monk in manifest

disgust; "what matters all this to thee or to me? Quit this city of folly and sin, and be off hence to thy command in the marches of Taurus, to stop the ravages of the Hagarenes who threaten the people of Christ."

"Thou hast not heard all, holy father, or I should not now be here and on my knees. I tell thee, the woman has seen her power. These subtle daughters of Eve know by instinct when the sons of Adam begin to feel weak. The flashing rays from those eyes burn me. They pierce my eyes with fiery points, as it were, when some royal traitor is blinded by red-hot needles. She smiles triumphant when she sees me quiver, and woman-like she loves to see me quiver again before her."

"Leave her, and begone to the East," broke in the priest, with no little impatience and contempt in his voice.

"That I cannot do, whilst I remain an Imperial officer of State. She has her purposes: she means to make me her creature, her tool, her lover—her——I know not how—I know not what is in her thought. She despises her own lord, she tempts him to wallow further in the mire of his whores, eunuchs, and catamites. She has great designs, and aspiring thoughts. She needs a commander who has the trust of our troops. Father, I tell thee, she has need of me; and I burn for her. She knows her power and my shame."

A long pause followed, and neither spoke. The monk meditated in silence. At last he spoke.

"Nicephorus Phocas, it cuts me to the heart to hear a warrior of high renown confess to being tempted into the toils of a woman such as this. I judge it to be a passing madness, which distance and thy own great duties and labours alone can cure. The monks of Saint Demetrius shall not be poisoned by the presence amongst them of thy fevered soul. Thou art not fit in the sight of God and His Mother for the spiritual life; thou art sorely needed by God and His Son for the martial life. Rome and Christ can be saved from Mahomet only by thee. Thou hast sinned against Christ and His Virgin Mother by idly toying with the Imperial temptress. See her no more, but hasten to thy post in the Anatolian mountains. There, in thy lonely tent, pray nightly to the Immaculate One for her blessing, and pass the day in the saddle amongst the scattered outposts of thy menaced command. On this condition alone can I give thee absolution for thy sin: sin as black in the sight of Christ and His Mother as if thou hadst been taken in open adultery,

and dragged to execution as a traitor. Accept this penance, or remain unaneled in thy sin and thy shame!"

The silence lasted for a space, till it grew acutely painful to both. With groans, and tears, and writhings, the chief at last uttered the fatal words—"I obey the Holy Mother Church!"

Then the monk rose to his full height; and, with a look of triumphant authority and a voice of thrilling power, as he placed his long, thin, emaciated hands on the bare head of the chief, he said—"Christ absolves thee from thy sin, and accepts thy obedience and service. Pass to thy appointed command, and do thy duty as a soldier of Rome and of Christ. I purge thee of thy sins in the name of the Trinity and of the Mother of God, into whose Holy keeping I now commit thee! Nicephorus Phocas, go in peace, and may God be with thee!"

"I go," murmured the chief, exhausted by his long agony and strife, "I go to my ruin—to my shame—to my death."

CHAPTER VIII

THE SACRED PALACE

THE gay and luxurious young Basileus was no sooner installed in his father's throne than he redoubled the riot and debauchery that had been kept in restraint, or, at least, in concealment by Constantine Born-in-the-Purple. Romanus, who had been born-in-the-purple himself, whose legitimacy as Augustus could not be disputed, whilst his personal popularity as a gallant and gracious Prince was renowned far and wide, saw not the slightest reason to curb or to restrain his excesses. He replaced most of the aged and trusty counsellors of his father with parasites and favourites of his own ; and the revels and buffooneries to which he gave himself, reminded the serious of the orgies of Elagabalus, or Michael the Drunkard. Wrestlers from Cappadocia, singers and lutists from the Lesbian theatres, boys who might have stood as models for the Apollino of the Vatican or the Hermaphrodite of the Louvre, lounged about the *koitôn* of the Basileus of New Rome. The Basilissa was not much seen in those sacred precincts ; for she troubled herself as little about the Basileus and his amusements as he did about her and hers. Indeed, women were no longer welcomed in the hareem of the voluptuous Romanus. Theophano had her own court, her privy purse, her favourites, her eunuchs, her guards—and her own schemes.

A week had hardly passed since the coronation ceremonies when Romanus, who had prolonged the feast late into the waning day, was surrounded by his creatures and his scandalous favourites, led on by Chærina, a disfrocked prelate, and now his coryphæus of the hermaphrodites. He had just listened to a fescennine song by his favourite buffoon, at which the parasites sought to surpass the applause of the Cæsar ; when, in the midst of a posture-dance by one of his young athletes, the Parakeimomenos sent his secretary to beg for an audience with the Basileus.

"Bring him in," cried Romanus, jovially, "if his Eminence will promise not to scold. I am never too busy to see my invaluable Nestor and *fidus Achates*. And so begone all of ye! satyrs, fauns, and young devils who would make a sinner of Saint Peter himself!"

Romanus, debauched as he was, was neither a fool nor an utter fribble; and he thoroughly understood that, if he was to enjoy his pleasures and his popularity, he must place the government of the Empire in able hands. Accordingly, he had given his confidence to the Lord High Chamberlain, the Eunuch, Joseph Bringas—whom he created anew the President of the Privy Council and of the Senate. Joseph, indeed, was a statesman of consummate ability and vast experience. Eunuch as he was, he had courage, energy, caution, and profound knowledge of men and of things. It had long been the tradition of the Empire to entrust the ultimate seals of office and the most important *arcana* of State to men who, either by their sacerdotal rank or the cruel ambition of their parents and Sovereigns, were incapable of succeeding to the purple themselves. Men so prepared from infancy for confidential employment about the cabinet and bedchambers of Basileus and Basilissa, were in no ways disparaged thereby, but held an honourable rank almost analogous to that of dukes in modern times. Joseph was more qualified to direct the fortunes of the Empire than any one of the many millions within it; and Romanus well knew his value: how much his own peace, good name, perhaps his throne and his life, depended on the brain and will of such a statesman.

After the ceremonious reverences by the Parakeimomenos on entering the august presence—reverences which the good-natured Basileus cut short with a pleasant welcome, "What brings ye here, my Lord, with so gloomy a look—at so unreasonable a season—to disturb our peace?"

"I have grave news from Miletus, most august Sovereign, which I cannot keep from your royal wisdom for an hour. An infidel fleet has eluded our guardships off Cnidus and Naxos, has swept up the Ægean, and has stormed and sacked the city of Miletus with horrible outrages of blood and lust. They have carried away ten thousand girls and youths into captivity, after massacring their parents."

"From whence do they come, these children of wrath; and how are we to find them if they have made good their escape?"

"They come from the island of Crete, which they first overran in the disturbed time of your royal predecessor, Michael the Stammerer, long before the august dynasty of Basil had mounted the throne. There, generation after generation, they have established their power, harassing the Christian people, and forming almost impregnable fortresses and arsenals. They issue thence from its hundred ports, as you must remember, time after time, sweeping the Ægean Sea up to the very gates of the Hellespont. You have heard of the terrible sack of Thessalonica in the age of your royal grandfather, Leo the Learned. And you must remember the incessant efforts in the late reign, and finally the disastrous expedition of Gongyles which cut your father's royal heart to its core, and, doubtless, shortened his life. The very existence of this haunt of infidels and pirates is a menace to the Empire, and drains its life-blood, its children, and its wealth. Our harried people, plundered and decimated, cannot pay the taxes due from them, and the finances of your Majesty are distressed. There is just arrived at the capital a young son of the late Governor of the Samian Theme, who has escaped from captivity, when the flourishing town of Miletus was stormed and laid in ruins. He saw his gallant father murdered and tortured, his mother defiled and murdered by these Hagarene demons, and his sisters carried off with himself to their hareems in Chandax, their stronghold in the island. The lad was preserved by his rare beauty for these monsters; and I crave your Majesty's grace to admit him to your presence, that you may hear from the lips of an eye-witness the horrors and desolation to which the most loyal and industrious of your Majesty's servants are subject."

"My excellent friend and sweet counsellor, could not this affair of State be submitted to the wisdom of our Privy Council to-morrow—or, indeed, at its next meeting—and perhaps with previous inquiry into the facts and conditions? And yet—well! if the lad be noble, and the Antinous you describe (and, by Saint Sebastian, these Paynims have a pretty taste in boys), why, I might see him at once—if he be within our Palace and presentable at this hour."

With this consent, the politic Minister introduced to the presence of his Sovereign the poor lad, who was encouraged to tell his horrible story and the sufferings of his family. He was, indeed, a youth of rare beauty and winning artlessness of manner. He still wore the girl's dress in which he had made

his escape from the Saracen hareem. After battling for days in an open boat in which he sailed forth at night alone, he had been fortunately picked up by a trading vessel that brought him into Greek waters. The slight robe he wore had been almost torn in rags from his graceful limbs, and sufficed to show that it was no girl, but a stripling of the finest Ionic type. The terrible life that he had passed of late had given him an energy and seriousness beyond his years. He spoke with eloquence, fire, and not a few sobs and tears as he told his awful tale. The voluptuous Basileus, whose thirst for adventure equalled his enjoyment of beauty, fixed his eyes on the lad, graciously encouraged him to speak, and listened with open ears to the thrilling and piteous tale.

Young Glaucus told how peaceful and happy the town of Miletus seemed one bright Sunday morning, when the churches were full, and the streets were thronged with gay crowds. No one was alarmed when a fleet of *dromons* was observed in the offing, treacherously hung with the Imperial ensigns.

Suddenly a startling cry rang through the city when it was discovered that the ships were not from the Imperial fleet, but were Saracen rovers filled with armed pirates. The boy described the gallant fight made by his father, who manned the walls with all the available fighting men—the furious assault by engines and missiles of the enemy—and their ultimate entrance by an unguarded postern. Once in possession of the arsenal, the town was given over to fire and sword. The youth wept as he told of the horrid fate of his father and his mother, how all that was valuable and precious was torn out of the houses, how the streets ran with blood, how churches had been burnt, and thousands of citizens who had fled to them for refuge perished in the flames. For three days and nights massacres continued, the booty was gathered in the holds of the ships, and a city of 50,000 inhabitants had been laid desolate. Ten thousand virgins, young women, and lads of tender age, amongst them nuns torn from their sacred monasteries with the children they had gathered round them, were collected in the market-place, stripped, inspected, catalogued like cattle at a fair, and finally put up to public auction and sold to the highest bidders, a portion both of the fairest virgins and youths being reserved for the commanders and chiefs.

The Basileus, to whom the more personal and thrilling part of Glaucus' narrative was as fascinating as a romance, put

many questions to the youth as to all his adventures and experiences, when the politic minister seized the first opportunity to dismiss the lad that he might impress the Imperial mind with the need of action.

"My Sovereign Lord," he said solemnly, "the truth is this—that a flourishing city, the centre of a most industrious province, is blotted out from thy royal dominions; its population is destroyed or dispersed; panic is spread through the islands and sea-board of the Ægean Sea; and a revenue of 50,000 pieces of gold is lost to the Imperial treasury. The capital itself is hardly safe; nor can I nor any servant of thy throne answer for its stability whilst this cancer is consuming the vitals of the Empire."

"You desire then, most resourceful of counsellors, to increase the strength and alertness of our fleet in the southern waters. Well! be it so. Double the fleet at Halicarnassus and Cnidus; station a second fleet at Cythera; and let both be provided with a new squadron of cruisers. Oh! best of all Parakeimomenoi, thou shalt have an order for their cost, though I may not buy myself a new Arabian charger, nor a Lydian singer for the next six months. My Empire shall come first, my Lord High Chamberlain, as I am Roman by name and in soul!"

"We know the glorious spirit that animates the heroic line of Basil, Leo, and Constantine," broke in the wily Eunuch, "but the need of the hour is far more serious than your Majesty conceives. The story brought by this eye-witness of the latest disaster which has just been so vividly told to your Grace, makes it clear that no vigilance or force in the fleet can restrain the audacity of these Saracens, so long as they can issue at will from their arsenals in Crete, and can in a night's voyage betake themselves to this secure stronghold after every raid on our coasts. After Crete is again our own, we shall restore to Rome all that the Hagarene has wrested from thy royal ancestors. Most Gracious Lord Basileus, thy throne is in peril whilst Crete is in the power of the False Prophet and his unbelieving crews of pirates. Crete must be Cæsar's; or Constantinople will not remain his own for ever!"

"Crete, Crete! most inconsistent of Lord Privy Councillors, have you not told me even to-day that Crete is impregnable to our forces by land or by sea? and is not that the answer which I and my father continually have received when we insisted on having it conquered by our arms?"

"By our forces as now or lately they have been organised, Crete was and is practically impregnable; nay, it would be madness to attempt its re-conquest by any forces that your Majesty now has on foot. But by an adequate force, by an irresistible fleet and an invincible army, such as the Empire can yet equip, Crete can be—shall be retaken. Nothing is impregnable that Rome and Cæsar resolve to subdue!"

"And thou hast just told me, My Lord-of-short-memory, how the boasted expedition of Gongyles ended in disaster, and how cruelly it wounded my royal father and his kingdom!"

"The expedition sent forth by thy royal father, great as it was, was not adequate for its tremendous task. It will be my care to equip a fleet and an army which will be ample—even for the formidable work of storming Chandax and restoring Crete to the Empire of Rome."

"And where shall we find the commander who is to succeed in the task in which thy illustrious predecessor Gongyles so egregiously failed?"

"It is just in that, my august Sovereign Lord, in which I plant my trust. Rome has still one invincible soldier to whom no mission is impossible. The entire equipment, strength, and numbers of the fleet and the army to be raised must be entrusted to one man, and that man must have absolute command and undivided authority by sea and on land, and the right to give orders of every sort, as if he were Cæsar himself."

"And that man is——"

"Nicephorus Phocas, O King of Kings, the General-in-Chief of the Orient Themes—he who never yet failed his Sovereign Lord."

"Ho! ho! ho! My most incomprehensible of Privy Councillors," broke in the Basileus with a ringing laugh, "what has converted your sagacity to the fierce Armenian hero? We thought ye were anything but friends. And staunch as I know him to be, and inestimable in the Anatolian marches, is it not tempting his virtue too much if we give him our Sovereign authority without a limit, and place him in effective command of the whole resources of our State—and that within a day's sail of our Byzantine capital? No! my Lord Parakeimomenos, never will I put temptation such as this in the way of any man, were he the Archangel Michael with his sword drawn—I have said it. Send your Belisarius off to the Saracen frontier—and place a good month's march between him and us."

"The reconquest of Crete, my august Lord and King, will take Nicephorus far enough away, and will occupy him long enough; and, indeed, may expose him to death and disaster, even more than the Saracen frontier. Nicephorus Phocas we all know to be the one great officer of the Empire who is incapable of treason as he is of fear. And has not the infallible eye of my Lord Basileus perceived that the temptations of Nicephorus Phocas lie not in the power he commands, nor in the Themes he controls, but rather they are within the Sacred Palace itself, and in the light that shines upon him there?" added the Eunuch in his most subtle and insinuating tone.

"Ah!" cried Romanus quickly, as a frown crossed the joyous and beautiful face of the young Cæsar, "thou counsellest me to find employment for this Hercules of mine lest he prove himself troublesome at home in sheer wantonness of heart and lack of heroic occupation. My Lord High Chamberlain, we understand you at last—we thank you and commend your frankness. Would that your colleagues of our Council were equally vigilant and outspoken. My Lord, we will hear more of this. Come to-morrow with the rest of our Privy Council. This matter is critical and urgent." The Basileus spoke with a seriousness and a dignity which he had not shown in the long interview, and as became an Emperor of Rome.

Romanus now dismissed his Prime Minister with real expressions of confidence, and relieved him of much of the ceremonial obeisances which the wily "bed-fellow" of his Sovereign was too prudent to omit. And the Basileus was already considering what new dissipation would best distract his mind from the cares of Empire, and from the lurking suspicion which the ambiguous words of the great Eunuch had planted for the first time in the careless heart of the Prince. But at this moment the peace of the Imperial privacy was disturbed by a fresh intrusion of a very different kind. Vehement expostulations, mixed with the sobs and cries of women, were heard at the door of the chamber. The noises and confusion increased until at last the guards and ushers of the royal presence found themselves unable to resist the pressure of women, who, with shrieks of grief and indignation, forced their way through the amazed and abashed group of attendants. They were the royal Princesses, own sisters of Romanus himself, beloved and honoured daughters of Constantine Born-in-the-Purple, and, like their father and their brother, equally

Porphyrogennetoi, with all the divinity that did then hedge such royal birth and origin. Zoe, the eldest of five, and next to her Theodora, each breaking from the feeble and half-hearted restraint ostensibly offered them by the confidential Eunuch-in-waiting, were the first to burst upon the privacy of their brother.

They were women of beauty, refinement, and high culture. Constantine, who was a loving and indulgent father, had been only too willing to keep his girls around him in the Palace, and fell into the advice of his politic counsellors to delay their marriage lest a husband, who would be a son-in-law of the Emperor, might endanger or disturb the succession of his own son. The Basileus, absorbed in art and literature as he was, took care to provide the Princesses with all the learning and accomplishments of the age, whilst he surrounded them with every luxury and delight which the most beautiful and most luxurious Palace in the world could offer. Young, gay, and cultivated, they had never till this day known an hour's anxiety nor a pang more serious than the loss of a pet bird or a hitch in their own most decorous and virginal flirtations.

"Sovereign Lord, brother Romanus," shrieked Zoe, as she flung herself down with her sister at the feet of the uneasy Basileus, "these barbarous wretches pretend that they have your sign manual to an order to expel us from the Palace—us, your own sisters—daughters of your father, who is hardly cold in his tomb—have orders to seize and force us off this very day!" And here she burst into such an agony of sobs that her voice became inarticulate—her fine countenance was convulsed with passion and terror—and her Imperial robes and ornaments were disordered by the prolonged struggle she had made to reach the throne of Cæsar. "They say, too, now," she screamed out in her despair, "that your order is to have us all imprisoned in a convent, buried out of sight of the world, robed like nuns in brown serge, without hair or ornament: nay, this lying priest dares to say that we are all to take the veil for ever."

"They must have forged this pretended order! Our brother is not so cruel!" shrieked Theodora, beside her sister, like her convulsed in tears and writhing on the marble pavement. "Romanus, can you bear to see us suffer—we who have played together from childhood—we who have never had an angry word in our lives—we who have so often saved you from our father's

anger? Say that you are not such a monster as to condemn your father's children to a living death!" And here both sisters sank down with sobs, and strove on their knees to reach the feet of their brother and take his hand. "Brother, brother, speak!" they both shrieked. But the eunuchs held them back from the hem of Cæsar's robe, whilst Romanus stammered out: "No! no! we cannot settle such a matter here, and in such a way. Back to your women's chambers, my children, and calm yourselves. This is a matter of State, for the Council to deal with."

His hesitating words only roused fresh storms of wailing from the women, for now the three other sisters, Theophano, Anna, and Agatha, managed to force their way into the room, from the corridor where they had heard what already had passed. They too flung themselves down in a group round the perplexed Basileus, who seemed torn by his two spirits within—unscrupulous selfishness and easy good-nature. The scene became one of wild confusion. The five Princesses, calling on their brother by every word of pity that could touch his heart and mingled with screams of indignation at the dreadful fate to which he was condemning them; the chamberlains, eunuchs, cubiculars, striving aimlessly to shield their Sovereign from the storm, and yet hesitating to offer indignity to the royal ladies, to whom till yesterday they had been the humblest of courtiers; the Sovereign Lord of the World torn in half by natural feelings and selfish purpose, made a tableau that could only be reproduced by the stage. The tumult and excitement had now roused the Sacred Palace. The great Chamberlain, Joseph Bringas, returned again to assist his Sovereign by his counsels, and with him one or two of the great officers of State, who had been summoned to the coronation ceremonies. The illustrious John Tzimisces, the right arm of Nicephorus Phocas and the second soldier of the Empire, was seen in the throng behind Theodora, to whose hand he was known to aspire; and there, too, was the young hero, Basil Digenes, at sight of whom (the courtiers would whisper) Agatha had been seen to blush. Romanus himself could no longer restrain his tears. "All this must be considered, my sweet girls," he said, as he raised the tender Agatha from the ground and kissed her on her pale cheek. A thrill passed round the Court; and the women felt they were saved.

But at this moment a new group broke into the assemblage.

A tall, gaunt, and terrible-looking monk, escorted by his acolytes, bearing an enamelled crucifix, with an *ikon* embossed with gems, stalked haughtily up to the very throne, and planting the Holy Emblem before him with his right hand, he cried aloud in a stern voice to the vacillating Basileus, "Sovereign Lord, Augustus, Autocrator over men on earth, thou wilt not forget that thou art the servant of the King of Kings, who is above—whose minister and interpreter we churchmen are. Thy royal decree, bearing the vermilion signet, and duly enrolled in thy chancery, has lawfully devoted to Christ and to the Mother of God these illustrious virgins of thy father's house, in order that they may pass into the more Sacred Palace of our Blessed Lady, wherein they will live with the angels, and not with men. They are already children of our Lady, and are devoted eternally to the blessed life of virginity. The office which thy wisdom and piety has committed to my charge by thy Imperial decree—to have them arrayed in the garb of Holy Church and consecrated to the Holy Life—this is a formal ceremony which their own ignorance and needless alarm has interrupted. But in the records of Heaven, as the Archangel above has graven it in the Mystic Book of Life, their bodies, like their souls, are already consecrated to Christ. To tear from Him His chosen bride would be sacrilege and outrage on His Holy Name. My Lord Basileus, I claim these royal virgins to present them to my Saviour and to my Church."

All shrank back aghast at the words of the monk. It was Antony, the Superior of the venerated convent of Stoudion, a fanatic of iron type, whose austerities and inflexibility had won him a wide ascendency in the city, where his influence was only second to that of the Patriarch himself. The weak and perplexed Basileus was plunged again in bewilderment. He had begun to feel the cruelty of his own edict: but he well knew the dangerous power that the monk of Stoudion possessed, and the relentless nature of the man in the cause of Holy Church and the Virgin Life. And now a fresh apparition struck terror and compunction into the heart of the Basileus. The groups parted as there advanced amidst solemn silence the stately figure of the Basilissa-Dowager, Helena, daughter of the late Emperor Romanus Lecapenus, widow of the late Emperor Constantine. She was robed in deep mourning, and her eyes alone betrayed the excitement and agonies she had endured. She stood before her son, with her daughters around her, looking like a Niobe or

Hecuba who sought to avert the stroke of fate from her offspring.

"I stand here, my son, whom death has just made my Sovereign, to learn if it can be truth that thou hast dared to consign the mother that bore thee to a convent. Am I also, who have queened it in this Sacred Palace for a whole generation, to be torn from my children and my home, from life and air, and thrust into the desolation of a nunnery? Romanus, if thou art bent on being a new Nero, a second Orestes, stab me in this womb which bore thee, as I stand here: and may God and the Mother of God witness between thee and me!"

"Mother! I cannot bear it—I will not—I meant it not—these priests have beguiled me. They have bereft me of reason," gasped Romanus in an agony of tears and sobs, and he strove to fold his mother in his arms.

"It was no priest that beguiled thee, Romanus, my beloved child. It was no priest, and no Minister of State. It was the sorceress, the demon, the base-born creature from the tavern, who was the death of thy father, and has been a curse to thyself!"

These words were still ringing round the dome of the Imperial chamber when Theophano glided in at the head of a splendid array of cubiculars, eunuchs, guards, and pages, in all the glamour of her Imperial vestures and her divine beauty, with a smile of triumph on her lips, and the glance as of an angry Juno in her eyes.

"My King, my Lord, my hero," burst forth the Empress, as she flung her siren's arms about the neck of her husband, and fascinated him with the fire of her eyes, "I am come to save thee, and keep thee true to thyself. Can the mighty Autocrator of Rome be twisted and turned from his purpose by the cries of girls, and the scoldings of a crone? Wilt thou suffer the Majesty of thy own Imperial purple to be besmirched by the ribaldry which passes amongst slaves in the street? In flinging their nicknames at thy wife, they are committing treason against thy sacred person. Who is the daughter of Lecapenus to bandy insults at *me*, the daughter of a hundred kings of Sparta down from Leonidas of Thermopylæ? Does the widow know who was her own grandfather, for Lecapenus, the foundling, himself never boasted of a sire? And cannot she remember the day when his sons, her own brothers, had their father, the mock Emperor of a day, seized in his bed and flung into a

monastery in an island? There, in like manner, it is time that she should go, this Hecuba, the widow-scold, and her shrieking girls. It is the rule of this Empire to keep no secret traitors near the throne—be they men or women—and especially women"—she added with a cruel sneer, "for they tempt men to be traitors and become their dupes and their tools. The Sacred Palace has no room for widows—no! nor for virgins. Their place is in the House of God, where they live with the angels, and are no longer the snare of men. My Sovereign Lord, submit to Holy Church, for whom the father here present speaks; be guided by thy Privy Council, whose voice the Lord Chamberlain has brought thee to-day!"

The wretched lad cowered under this torrent of reproaches and commands. In breathless silence he turned his eyes from the monk to the Chamberlain, and thence he fixed them on the ground in sore perplexity and utter bewilderment. Stifled sobs alone broke the agonising silence.

"Romanus, my husband, my lover," hissed the Basilissa at last, as she forced him to look into her eyes, and he felt the perfume of her breath steal into the marrow of his bones, "Romanus, my lord, I say, choose between me and them. Dost thou choose them and to see me no more? For I swear to thee by the Mother of God in the Daphne, that unless the widow and her girls do retire to the convent they are decreed to inhabit, I take the veil myself and forswear thee and thy Palace for ever!"

This threat, supported by so sacramental an oath that no man had ever known to be broken, shook the young Cæsar from head to foot. He folded his wife in his arms, and she sank on his bosom in a well-acted scene of rapturous affection. At the sight of this final decision, the Princesses shrieked aloud. Their mother flung herself forward, and sought to snatch the robe of her son, but was checked by the crucifix, which the monk struck fiercely down between them. The Lord High Chamberlain gave the signal, and uttered one sharp word to the royal guard and accubitors. The eunuchs sprang forward, and seized the Princesses, who screamed and struggled in their unholy grasp. The ladies of their retinue joined in the *mêlée* and sought to tear their beloved mistresses from their jailors' hands. A wild hubbub broke forth. "Save us," "spare us," "cruel brother," "wicked woman," "ungodly priest," were the broken phrases heard above the shrieks of the women. After

an unseemly struggle, such as ill became a Palace and was cruel indignity to royal ladies, they were dragged through the corridors and hurried in litters to the convents which yawned to receive them.

The Emperor, torn to pieces and almost fainting under the storm of his emotions, flung himself down on a couch, buried his face in his embroidered robe, and wept the most bitter tears he had known since childhood.

Theophano turned from him with a look of scorn and pity. "The granddaughter of the Scythian barber," said she in the ear of her principal Eunuch, "will not again fling names at the descendant of Spartan kings!"

CHAPTER IX

THE MUSTER OF THE CRUSADE

A GLORIOUS July morning in the year of our Lord 960 was irradiating the shores of the Propontis and the porticoes and domes of Byzantium; and already the city and Palace of the Cæsars were crowded with brilliant throngs and gala trappings of expectant triumph. All the terraces which commanded a view of the sea were full of eager sightseers. The walls that girdled the city on the seaside were covered with dense groups; and the sea itself, from the Golden Horn to the Princes Islands, was alive with thousands of vessels of every description as far as the eye could reach. The mighty expedition to recover Crete from the Infidel was at last about to sail.

In the Sacred Palace itself a throng of courtiers and high officials were gathered in the *Tzikanisterion*, or polo ground, and in the gardens, porticoes and arcades that adjoined it, waiting for their Majesties and the great Ministers of State, who were to watch the fleet at its departure and wish Godspeed to its illustrious commander. In the corridors and cloisters of the Palace all was animation and a hubbub of greetings, inquiries, and ardent anticipations. A group of Gentlemen of the Wardrobe, Grooms of the Chamber, and a Silentiary were discussing the exact constitution of the vast expedition. Nicetas, the Paphlagonian, a *vestiarius*, or gentleman of the wardrobe, was loudly exclaiming that so powerful an armament had never left the Golden Horn since the age of the great Heraclius.

"It is so many generations since that occurred," rejoined Dionysius, attached to the Cubicular service, "that we cannot make any comparisons; and no one is bound to take literally all the fulsome eulogies we read in the Heracliads of George of Pisidia, I suppose."

Here they were joined by Theodosius the Deacon, who already was preparing materials for his own iambics on "The

Conquest of Crete." "Let us remember," said he, "the well-omened words of George, when he addressed his King :—

> 'Return triumphant with thy sable greaves
> Dyed crimson in the blood of heathen foes.'"

"If thou canst compose such a poem as that of George, most reverend Deacon, thou wilt, indeed, be famous," said Dionysius ; "but is it not a somewhat doubtful compliment to insinuate that Nicephorus when he returns in triumph is to be installed in the vermilion buskins ?"

"A truce to unseemly gibes on such an auspicious day," said the poetic Deacon. "I have been collecting in my note-book the exact figures which show the strength of the fleet and army, and from a friend of mine, who is employed as scribe on the general staff, I have obtained a copy of the official return prepared for the Privy Council."

"Well, let us hear as much of it as is lawful to be divulged to mere civilians as we are," said the other speakers with one voice.

"Know then," said the Deacon with importance, "that the entire armament, both on sea and on land, has been organised and equipped by the ever-victorious Nicephorus Phocas, Commander-in-Chief, whom God and His Mother preserve."

"And have the Ministers of State, and above all the most noble Lord of the Bedchamber, had no hand in the work ? We know that they have been toiling night and day for six months," said Stephanos, the Silentiary, who was a creature of the Eunuch Joseph.

"Certainly," rejoined the Deacon, anxious to retrieve his slip of speech, "the great Minister of our Imperial Master has brought to bear on the task the whole of his unequalled energy and experience, and he has toiled to satisfy the demands and plans of the commander. Nicephorus designed the whole array, which the Parakeimomenos carried into execution. As both soldier and statesman recognised that the future of Rome hangs on the issue of this critical war, they have worked together as one brain—the General bringing to bear his consummate mastery of tactics, the Minister exerting his wonderful control over all the resources of the Empire."

"And Rome has at last risen to the occasion," said Dionysius; "it was time that she did !"

"Everything has been ordered in the manner prescribed by

our late blessed Lord, Constantine Born-in-the-Purple, whom the Saints are now conducting to Paradise, as he has set forth in the first book of his *Memoirs and Regulations*. But in many arms, and especially in cavalry, the strength has been much increased by the foresight of Nicephorus. The first brigade is formed of Thracians and Macedonians from the mountains of Rhodope and Hæmus. Then are enrolled picked troops from the Eastern Themes, Cappadocians, Lycaonians, Anatolians, Isaurians, Mardaites, Opsicians, and Galatians—those tall, fierce descendants of the Northern invaders of old. Of course, Nicephorus has selected, for the centre and bulk of his army, his own Armenian regiments whom he has so often led to victory. But Bringas himself has insisted on adding a division of Ross, those Scandinavian mercenary giants who are willing to serve under our eagle. And there are no less than twenty-five squadrons of the wild horsemen from the Northern Frontier, beyond the Ister and the Euxine, who call themselves Hungarians, Patzinaks, and Khazars, and I know not what outlandish names they bear—names uncouth enough to fit into iambic verse!" said the poet with a sigh.

"Unspeakable barbarians and unbaptised heathen is what I call them," said Dionysius.

"They fight for the Cross stoutly enough, and they follow the General to the death," said the Deacon; "they are undoubtedly the finest light horsemen that God ever made. The Hagarenes of the desert, for all their pure-bred steeds, are no match for these hairy barbarians of the steppes."

"And what may the total of the forces amount to?" asked Dionysius eagerly.

"The roll that I have seen copied from the lists signed by General Nicephorus himself, and countersigned by Lord Bringas, brings up the total of all arms, of all nations and tongues, to fifty-seven thousand eight hundred and ninety. Each nation fights with its own arms, costume, and officers, interpreters to each company conveying in their barbarous jargons the Greek word of command."

"No such army ever left the Golden Horn!" they all cried at once. "May Mary Hodogetria bring them home in triumph!"

Here a movement in the gay throng led the speakers to pass into the lovely garden adjoining the polo ground, the arcades around which were crowded with ladies of the Court. The parterres and terraces, as they rose one above another, were

bowers of roses, myrtles, vines, oleanders, and carnations, and the air was heavy with the perfume of their blossom. A group of fair women in their brightest robes of silk gauze and lace saluted the poet and his friends, as they joined them in the open terrace hung with awnings of Oriental tapestry.

"Tell us poor ignorant women, O most reverend Deacon," said the beautiful Theodora, the young wife of a new lord-in-waiting, "what are the names and uses of all these myriads of ships that we see at anchor in the bay; and explain to us all the mysteries of the marvellous instruments with which they are filled."

The poet was only too ready to dilate on his favourite theme and to display his official information.

"Gracious Lady Theodora, and sweet ladies," he said, "I am delighted to do your bidding. The entire fleet consists of vessels, large and small, no less than 360 in number, but, of course, most of these are transports, cutters, and smaller boats. The great ships of war that they call *dromons* are 123 in number, each carrying from 250 to 300 men, about one-quarter of whom are from the regular army. The cruisers of the Pamphylian build carry 150 to 130 men. Of these swift ships there are ninety-five. The ships of war, with double or single banks of oarsmen, thus number 218; and carry altogether 49,250 men, about half of whom are oarsmen and seamen from the Peloponnesus and the Ægean Islands, and from the Asian coasts."

"And what do you call this great ship moored close against the harbour of Boucoleon near us?" asked Theodora—"the one with three banks of oars, I mean."

"That is the commander's own flagship—*The Archangel Michael*—one of the largest *dromons*, or warships, that we have. It is waiting now to receive him on board."

"And what is the great turret in the middle of her?" asked the fair girl.

"That is the war-tower to which the fighting men ascend in action—the *xylocastron*—from the bulwarks of which they pour down missiles, stones, and molten lead."

"And the smaller turret in front with the brazen throat like the dragon which St. George slew with his spear?" she asked again.

"Oh! that is the barbette from which our *siphons* shoot forth the Greek fire that is the terror of our foes. Each *dromon* carries three of these guns, which spout forth streams of this liquid and

unquenchable fire through the brazen throat of the dragon at the prow. Beside which, the ships carry grenades, or pots of this combustible liquid arranged in rows round the bulwarks. You can see them hung like oil-jars round the bulwarks of the *St. Michael.* This is our secret: and our Greek fire makes our ships invincible at close quarters."

"And for what are all these clumsy-looking merchant and traffic vessels which seem to be swarming on the sea?"

"These are the great transports filled with the men, horses, artillery, and stores. They number 142. They carry an average of fifty men each, and number in all 8,640, thus making a grand total of 57,890. Everything has been carefully thought out by the general and the Council. I can even show you the figures," said the Deacon, in his ardour drawing forth his tablets wherein he had copied down the main items of the equipment. "Yes! here are the lists. Every warship carries aboard her some seventy men-at-arms. In her storage are seventy coats of mail; eighty helmets; twenty-four light corselets; one hundred swords; eighty lances; seventy shields; twenty halberds; one hundred javelins; and one hundred bolts; with twenty cross-bows, and fifty bows with double strings each; 10,000 arrows; two hundred darts; 10,000 calthrops or prongs; fifty surcoats; fifty steel caps; and seventy baking pans."

"Oh! spare us these catalogues of weapons, good Deacon; poor girls as we are do not so much as know what all these mean!"

"Ah! but I have not nearly done," said Theodosius, "for there are all the munitions of war:—Battering-rams with their iron rams' heads, and turtle-back shields to protect them from assault; catapults with their windlasses, to hurl rocks and bolts at the walls; cranes, palisades, mallets, barrels, cables, spars, ropes, one hundred axes, one hundred ship's adzes, 3,000 lbs. of lead, 200 lbs. of zinc, 200 lbs. of tin, 3,000 lbs. of iron, 3,000 nails, 1,000 spades, 2,000 buckets; and for each ship, 120 spare oars, masts, sails, hawsers, and anchors——"

But here the poet was interrupted by shouts of laughter from the women, who had been deluged with too much of his official catalogues. "We are not in training for the Admiral's cabinet," cried they.

"And how will you get these uncouth names into the iambics of your cantos, O friend of the Muses?" asked Nicetas, of

the Robing-room; and turned the laugh against the poor Deacon.

"Well," said he, "did not Homer fill the second *Iliad* with his catalogue of the ships and their captains? The world shall rehearse my *Iliad—The Taking of Crete*—a thousand years hence. Have you heard my invocation? Something new and sublime, I can assure you. Listen to this:—

> 'Old Rome, our mother, grudge not to thy child
> That New Rome shall an equal glory boast.
> Thy Scipios and thy Cæsars have not yet
> Drained to the dregs the flowing cup of Fame.'"

But before the poet could recite any more of his epic, which he fondly believed would outlive the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and which has certainly fulfilled his boast by surviving a thousand years, the courtiers thronged to the upper terrace, where the heralds and ushers announced the approach of their Majesties. Presently Romanus appeared, in a magnificent tunic and robe of soft samite, embroidered and brocaded with a pattern of the Basileus spearing a lion and with other quaint devices, and a light diadem that shone with emeralds and rubies. He was surrounded by a suite of his principal officials, and not a few of his parasites, amongst whom the fair young Glaucus of Miletus had been enrolled much against his own desire. And foremost rose the tall form of the Parakeimomenos, Joseph Bringas, to-day more than ever the real wielder of power.

"The Saints above have vouchsafed to us a glorious morning for the great start, most fortunate of Lord Chamberlains, and most mighty of Eunuchs," said the Prince gaily. "At whose altar have you besought such a boon?"

"At the shrine of Saint Romanus, my Sovereign Lord, most fortunate of Kings," said the politic Joseph; "my task has been but to carry out the orders of your Majesty, and to satisfy the demands of the soldier to whom your wisdom has committed the fortune of Rome."

"Let the Chief be summoned then, that we may give him our royal blessing and speed him on his enterprise, which you men of craft and forebodings will not suffer me to lead in person."

"Rome and this city which God guards would not be safe if Cæsar had quitted it, sire! The Lord Commander-in-Chief waits your Majesty's summons."

The crowds parted and formed in an expectant circle as the form of Nicephorus was seen advancing to do homage to the

Basileus. Arrayed in resplendent armour, he looked grave, resolute, and confident, as he rose from the ceremonial obeisances that custom prescribed.

The Basileus received his great vassal with dignity, honour, and friendliness, and addressed him his vows for his triumph with all the graciousness that made Romanus popular with his servants and people.

"We envy you the honour of leading so vast a host which my taskmasters of the Council will not permit me to join, greatly as I desire to fight by the side of so illustrious a warrior. Nor need I tell you, my Lord General, that the whole resources of our Empire are committed to your charge, and that Rome has now no other army—and no second fleet."

"Most Gracious Sovereign, no man knows so well as Nicephorus himself how great a trust has been committed to his hands. And no man is more sensible of the supreme confidence with which his King has honoured his demands for men, arms, ships, and material, nor of the zeal with which your Majesty's Council have supplied him with all that he required. We whose lives have been passed on the Asian frontier in battling with the ever-increasing hordes of the False Prophet, well know that Rome or Islam must fall in the end; that this royal city itself must become one day the chief throne of the Infidel, unless we drive him back into his deserts and his steppes. For some hundred and fifty years he has been master of Crete, and has continually strengthened his power and defied all our efforts to recover it. Whilst he holds it, thy Empire is being bled to death, O King! It must be won back or Rome is ruined. We must stake our all on this venture, and no sacrifice is too great for such an end. My Lord Basileus, we go forth with the aid of Christ and His Blessed Mother to save the Cross and His people. We will win back Crete for the Cross and for Rome, or I and my men—or such parts of us as the Hagarene dogs have not devoured—will lie rotting on the soil of that island. God be merciful to us, miserable sinners, and strengthen the hands of us, weak servants of His Holy Name!"

But here, as the Chief ended his audience with the Basileus and was passing away with the official reverences in use, he received a special summons from the Empress, who, with her officers and ladies, was standing apart in a more retired part of the royal portico. Theophano was radiant in her most lovely smile and in her most airy draperies of summer. She was

wrapped in diaphanous clouds of silk gauze, dyed with the hues of the softiest sunrise, and all dazzling with pendant jewels and patines of gold. She beamed on the hero as he advanced to her feet, and overwhelmed him with her praises and fervent prayers for his return in triumph. Nicephorus prostrated himself before her, and seized the hand she permitted him to kiss. She bent over him till her lips almost touched his head, and she whispered in his ear, as her perfumed breath filled the soul of the warrior to intoxication—"Come back to us, thou new Belisarius, in glory, and thou wilt find in the Sacred Palace a more generous Theodora. Forget not that the saviour of Rome is ever destined to become its master!—master of Rome, and master of Rome's mistress."

Stunned by the manner of his reception, with these mysterious words ringing in his ears, the Chief bowed himself from the presence and nerved his whole nature to the great task he had in hand. His officers and staff, after the prescribed ceremonies of presentation and leave-taking were fulfilled, followed him to the port of Boucoleon, with its marble quays and staircase, whence the barges in waiting took them to their ships.

When the Commander-in-Chief and his captains were on board and all was ready to weigh anchor, the Basileus and Basilissa, each surrounded with a brilliant court, mounted the Imperial stand that had been built up at the water's edge to witness the scene. It was surely one of the most magnificent that the eye of man had ever till that day beheld. Far out to sea across that grand bay, now glancing in the morning sun, and surrounded with mountains, headlands, and distant towers and churches, the vast fleet was spreading its coloured sails. The decks were crowded with soldiers in various arms and accoutrements; some were the mail-clad cataphracti; the Varangian guards with huge axes and gilt corselets, the Thracians in their stout jerkins of leather and sheepskins, the Scythians and Ross in bearskin and sables, the Isaurian mountaineers in white capotes. The masts of the warships were topped with emblems and banners of fantastic design, and their gilt and bronze prows represented the gaping jaws of beasts of prey. The shouts of the captains, standing on high in their turrets, re-echoed by the boatswains below, as the anchors and hawsers were swung in to the monotonous songs of the seamen, resounded across the waters. And now the rowers settled down in their benches, and the huge sweeps slowly began to

plunge through the foaming waves in response to the rhythmic beat of their leaders. At the appointed moment, the Basileus himself gave the sign to the Patriarch, who was stationed in a commanding spot, surrounded by his prelates, clergy, deacons, choir, and acolytes, who carried aloft the most venerated *ikons*, pictures, and crucifixes that the sacred edifices could yield.

A profound hush then fell on the vast throng, and the rowers held up their vessels on their oars, as one by one the captains ceased to shout and commanded a solemn silence for prayer. Then was heard far across the waters the shrill voice of the aged Polyeuctus, blessing the fleet and invoking the Divine Aid, and ending with the "Holy! Holy! Holy! Triune God and Blessed Mother of God, preserve in Thy Holy keeping this army and this fleet which goes forth to save Thy people from the apostate children of Ishmael!" Then the choir took up the words and thrice repeated the invocation of the Patriarch. This was followed by a hymn, wherein the immense body of monks, churchmen, and catechumens joined, so that the volume of voices rang out across the sea to the shores on the other side of the strait. And as the last notes of the choir died away, a roar of cheers broke forth in endless bursts of farewell and Godspeed from the hundreds of thousands who lined the walls and terraces, and who had been gathered to see the great departure—from the point where the lighthouse stands on the Golden Horn at the eastern corner of the city, round to the shore of Hebdomon on the western plain beyond the walls. As each battleship and transport passed within hearing of the mighty roar of voices, the crews and troops on board returned the shout; and the trumpets and cymbals, drums and fifes, rang out their martial notes with a crashing sound. They were followed for some short distance by crowds of light-sailing craft and gaily-trimmed caïques, which carried out to the fleet the holiday sightseers from the city. And so, with wild hopes, resounding cheers, and solemn anthems of prayer and blessing, the great Crusade of the Tenth Century sailed forth to do battle with the Saracen.

All through the day the vast fleet of warships and lighter vessels kept on their south-westerly course in the bright sunshine, with a gentle breeze that blew down the straits from the Euxine Sea; and till late in the evening eager crowds from the city remained watching the sight on the walls and on the open terraces above. As the last battleship disappeared in the offing,

they gathered in the Forums and porticoes discussing the event; whilst the churches, shrines, and wayside oratories were filled with worshippers in supplication and silent prayer. All through that eventful day and far into the night, the priests and monks throughout the city kept pouring forth their endless chants and monotonous invocations to all the Saints and divinities in turn, amidst ten thousand *Trisagions* and *Kyries*, clouds of incense and procession of *ikons*.

But all this time of national exultation and hope, gloom and despair hung heavily in the massive convents wherever women who had been forced to take the veil as nuns lived out their dreary lives "with the angels," as the euphemism in use would put it. And in none was there a deeper despair than in the Myrelaeon convent, where the Princesses Anna and Agatha were immured. After the terrible scene with their brother, as told in the last chapter, the Queen-mother and her five daughters had been dragged forth by the eunuchs and cubiculars of the Sacred Palace and carried off to the convent of *Canicleion* (or the Rubric). It had once been the Palace of the magnificent Theoctistus, the Finance Minister, who held the vermilion seals, and had been murdered under Michael the Drunkard, when the Basileus had converted his victim's splendid abode into a monastery. Once within its fatal portals, the royal ladies were at the mercy of the inexorable Antony, the Abbot of the Stoudion, who had torn them from the weakness of Romanus. In spite of their protests, their shrieks of rage, and on the part of the younger women their convulsive struggles, the monk had their long hair cut short, their royal vesture taken off; and, whilst three sturdy sisters held them by main force, they were dressed in the coarse brown serge robes of the Order of Saint Basil. They were literally dragged to the altar, and the mockery of the consecration service was gone through, the fanatic monk troubling himself little that the vows of the Order were not distinctly uttered by any of them, and were not uttered at all, even as a pretence, by the two youngest Princesses, who obstinately refused to give any consent to the act of their immolation as brides of Christ.

It was soon found that the Queen-mother was so cruelly affected in mind and in body by all that she had suffered, that her very life and reason were despaired of; and Romanus was easily induced by her entreaties to suffer her to return to a secluded wing of the Palace, where she remained in strict

retirement and a hopeless invalid for the few months that she had still to breathe. Nor did Theophano herself offer any opposition to this, when she found the Queen-mother so utterly fallen from power, and so feeble in body and mind.

The five Princesses in the *Canicleion* nunnery were enabled to meet and take counsel together, and by their prestige as sisters of the reigning Emperor, their rank as undoubted Porphyrogennetoi, and their own ability and force of character, they soon recovered much of their influence. It became known to the confidantes of the Empress that they were conspiring to recover their liberty and rank, that in spite of all the exhortations and orders of the Abbot, who insisted on confessing them himself, they still retained in private their lay dresses and habits, and obstinately declined to observe the fastings and austere rules of the Order to which they were supposed to be vowed. Secret friends and partisans of influence obtained the ear of the politic Joseph, who thought it high time to have some counterpoise to the ambition of the Empress; and at length, by his secret connivance, the good-natured Romanus was willing to mitigate his cruel decree, and a tacit compromise was effected. The Princesses were allowed to inhabit royal palaces and to receive the appanages and privileges of their rank, upon their formal consent to accept their consecration to the Virgin Life of professed nuns. The three elder Princesses outwardly conformed to this arrangement. They were installed in the Palace of Antiochus, near the Hippodrome and the great Church of St. Sophia, living like the noble and royal canonesses of Western Europe, but except in the matter of betrothal and marriage, not otherwise deprived of their Imperial honours. And ultimately, as we know, the Princess Theodora became herself Empress as wife of John Tzimisces.

The two younger Princesses stoutly refused the compromise, and would not accept the obligation of nunship; and Agatha, her father's favourite, and the most thoughtful of the whole family, insisted on treating the ceremony of her consecration as a blasphemous mockery. She persuaded her sister Anna to join her in the refusal. Both of them were therefore removed to a still more secluded nunnery, that of Myrelaeon, a palace formerly built by their mother's father, Lecapenus, when Regent. It stood on the upper reaches of the Golden Horn at the water-side, not far from the walls beyond Blachernæ. In that which once was the guard-room of old, a chamber which hung over

the sea, and was far removed from the sights and gaieties of the city, the Princess Agatha was immured as a prisoner of State, but even there she was able to have occasional intercourse with her sister Anna, and also with her aunt, the late Augusta Sophia, widow of Christopher, eldest son of Romanus Lecapenus. She also, at the fall of that family from the Purple, had been consigned to the life of a strict nun in the same convent of Myrelaeon. It was in truth a kind of *suttee* of Byzantine manners that the widow or discarded wife of a fallen prince or noble should be consigned to a nunnery in some secluded monastery near the capital. The fall of the house of Lecapenus had been so complete, and the good-will of the Empress Helena towards her unfortunate sister-in-law was so effective, that the ex-Empress Sophia was still able, through the old adherents of her family, to obtain very considerable authority, always short of her own delivery from the convent, which at her age she no longer sought.

This night she was exerting all her powers of persuasion to induce the sisters Anna and Agatha to accept the conditions of comparative restoration to lay life, to which the three elder Princesses had already consented. She pressed them to remember the youth, generous nature, and unquestioned autocracy of their brother the Emperor, the hope of gradual improvement in their terms, and the danger of further incensing so terrible a woman as the Empress.

"Twenty years have passed," said the aged Princess, "since I, too, was thrust from the Sacred Palace, where I once was honoured as the wife of a Cæsar. I have grown accustomed to my quiet lot in my old age, and I would not now exchange these sombre robes for those of an Augusta, even if I could. I, too, once had a proud spirit, but it is broken and dead, as I am to the world. My sweet child, you will never be able to endure the trial. Yield to your brother, who, with all his faults, has a heart to be touched. And you may yet find a happy life, and, who knows, perhaps an illustrious marriage, worthy of your birth in the Purple and your royal race."

The clear-sighted Agatha might feel the worldly wisdom of her aunt's advice, which had already brought the gentle Anna to the melting mood. But the last words of the ex-Augusta Sophia about her birth and royal race touched a secret chord in the heart of the girl, who had so often quivered when she

heard it said that few were fit to mate with Princesses of the house of Basil.

She flushed, and with a look of resolution and fire that would become a Virgin Martyr, she replied, "Never will I dishonour myself and forswear the teaching that my mother gave me, by consenting to treat as a consecration to Christ the outrage inflicted on me when the monk and his nuns forced on me the mockery of this garb. I have poured out my soul in prayer to my Saviour, and to His Blessed Mother in heaven. They have heard my cries and my sorrows. And a spirit within me has revealed it to my heart, that the good Lord Himself does not vouchsafe to accept the forced sacrifice of His devoted hand-maiden. No! my dear aunt, they may imprison me, they may torture me, they may kill me, but they shall never force me to profess myself by a lie the bride of Christ." This conversation was now interrupted by the entrance of one of the sisters of the nunnery, who had been assigned as attendants of the Princess. She came, she said, with a peremptory message from the Abbot himself, who required the immediate presence of the nun, Sister Euphemia, the name given to Agatha "in religion," in the confessional of the chapel. This unexpected summons the Princess was inclined to defy. But her aunt warned her of the danger of flagrant disobedience to the all-powerful prelate; and the attendant sister whispered in her ear that a great surprise and unexpected deliverance might yet be in store for her. The Princess accordingly submitted to the command, and was conducted through the corridors to the darkened chapel of the convent, where she took her place on her knees in the accustomed place of confession. The prelate was already seated in his recess, and, as usual, had chosen to cover his whole person in his monastic garb, and to conceal his face in his cowl.

"My daughter," he began, in a voice purposely simulated and subdued to a whisper, "I have called thee to confession to learn if thou art still resolved to resist the Superior of thy Order, and to defy the mandates of Mother Church in repudiating thy consecration to Christ as His bride."

"Father, I tell thee plainly—for I will treat thee with more frankness and with more courtesy than thou hast treated me—I am no bride of Christ. No threat and no cruelty shall ever force me to utter or to act a falsehood, which I hold to be a profanation of His Holy Name. I am no bride in heaven; no,

nor shall I ever be a bride on earth," she uttered, with a deep sigh that she could not restrain, and abruptly ended her half-uttered sentence.

"My daughter, hast thou indeed registered a vow to lead a solitary life, and never to listen to the love of any man?" said the monk, with a new eagerness in his voice that seemed to tremble at his own words.

"No man has ever sought my love, I tell thee," she said haughtily to such a question, "nor will I, even in confession, bring my lips to utter what Agatha might answer if he did. If she ever had such dreams, they are vanished in the black night that has fallen upon my miserable life. But what means, my Father Abbot, this sudden summons to me this night, and what are my maiden dreams or vows to thee or to thine? Why am I here? What is it that thou askest of me?"

"Royal Lady," said the monk, now dropping his voice to an impassioned whisper, "thy maiden dreams are all in all to one who loves thee better than his own soul, and who is at this moment risking life, torture, and mutilation in the effort to protect and save thee. Nay, do not start or flee, noblest, purest, bravest of women! Steel thy nerves to be still, and listen to our schemes to rescue thee from this dungeon of the priests. Nay! by the Mother of God, do not move or cry out, for three sisters of the convent wait within sight of us, and only one of them is in our plot. Remain as thou art and listen to one who, on the field of battle, in the stormy seas, on the solitary mountains of his home, has learned to pray to thy image along with that of the Blessed Agatha, whose name thou bearest, as the true saint of his faith and his hope. Listen to him now, for he has come through fire and water to save thee!"

At the first words of this most startling address the maiden had detected the manly tones of the young hero of her day-dreams, and wild hopes and exultation thrilled through her veins, as she steeled herself to retain her attitude of a penitent, and to hear out the mysterious story of the confessor.

"See who it is that has dared to seek thee thus," said he, as he threw back the cowl, and showed her the gallant features of Basil Digenes, the Romanised son of the Emir of Edessa.

"By the aid of the venerable Princess, thy aunt and fellow-prisoner, I have matured a plan of escape for thee. Three of the sisters of this convent are our confederates in the scheme,

and by their help I have succeeded to-night in assuming the part of thy tyrant, the Abbot. My own lady-sister, Theodosia, as thou knowest, the wife of the Patrician, George Comnenus, is now in her summer palace on the island of Proconnesus, where she will receive and conceal thee, until the heart of Romanus is softened, for the family of the Comneni is too powerful to be defied. To-night, at midnight, I will be waiting beneath thy chamber window, with two of thy ladies who served thee in the Palace, and a stout crew of boatmen. The three sisters of this convent who are entirely devoted to our service will supply thee with fitting lay dress, and also with a rope ladder to descend from the window on to the waters below, where the boat shall be ready to convey thee to my sister. Thou hast heart for such an enterprise, true daughter of the lion race of Basil, I know full well, if thou canst trust the honour of the son of the Saracen," said the enamoured young hero of the Marches, who, even in his stormy life of adventure, had never embarked upon a more chivalrous escapade. He gazed on the maiden with a deep and rapturous appeal in his countenance.

Agatha paused and communed with herself. Then, without a word, she took the hand of the pretended confessor and gently pressed it with her own.

"And can Agatha learn to love him whom she has already learned to trust?" said her ardent lover, as he kissed her hand again and again.

"It will be time to speak to her of love," she said softly, "when Agatha has put off the garb of Euphemia, the nun. But that I will do this very night, with the help of Our Lady in heaven above. Into her holy keeping I commit my body and my soul."

CHAPTER X

THE CONQUEST OF CRETE

THE scene now shifts to that magnificent island of Southern Greece, whence in pre-historic ages so many germs of ancient civilisation had been carried to the mainland. The northern headlands and bays of Crete were still wrapt in dim twilight, whilst a glorious sun of July had tinted the topmost crags of Mount Ida, and its beams gradually swept downwards on to the lower ranges, upland pasturages, woodlands, and teeming meadows of that beautiful island. From point to point, as the day rose, the eye caught sight of bands of swarthy Africans, for the most part in white tunics, armed with spear and sword, whilst mailed Emirs in turbans and snowy burnoose hurriedly passed from post to post across the glens. Light-clad messengers on quick Arab barbs dashed across the open spaces, or scrambled up the rocky path to some castle on its pinnacle of stone. Far as the eye could reach the whole coast seemed alive with excitement and moving hosts.

From the bay that faces the petty islet then called Dia, a small band of Arab spearmen were hurriedly dragging three bound prisoners to an eminence which commanded a range of view both east and west. There was displayed on a lofty lance-head the streaming standard of the Chief Emir, around whom were grouped camels and barbs with embroidered housings, mailed warriors and ebon footmen from the Soudan. When the party had dragged their captives to the commander, by a gesture he ordered them to be brought to his presence, and called for an interpreter to put his question in the Greek tongue. The Emir Abd-el-Aziz, the Governor of Crete, looked what he was, one of the heroes of Islam in the long death-grapple which for seven centuries and a half the Crescent maintained against the Cross of Rome. He well knew the vital importance of defending the island which his creed had held for one hundred and thirty years. All his demands for help from the Asian side

had been paralysed by the internal confusions of the Caliphate of the East. The urgent embassy he had despatched to the great Abderrahman, the Caliph of Spain, had not yet returned. Left with his single island force to meet the mighty host and navy of Rome, he strained every nerve to resist the Christians to the death.

"Who are these men, and where were they taken?" he asked the leader of the band who had brought them, the captain in fact of one of the corsairs which had scoured the Ægean Sea with such success.

"Last night," said the seaman, "as we were watching the advance of the misbelievers, we sighted three of his dispatch boats on the look-out for a good landing. We cut off one of them; and after a stout fight dragged the survivors ashore, Allah be praised!"

"What have you learned of the enemy's strength?" said the Emir.

"We have sighted three squadrons, each of which is believed to contain more than one hundred sail. And they are within a few hours of the coast."

"Require the prisoners to report the strength of the enemy, and the place where they seek to land. If they speak they shall be free to serve the one God and His Prophet. If they refuse, send for the Provost Marshal and his men."

The alternative was duly interpreted to the wretched captives, bleeding with their wounds and panting from the haste with which they had been dragged. A smile of defiance was their only answer. The two foremost prisoners were seamen from Chios; the third was no soldier, but a landsman from Thessalonica, pressed into the service of the oars.

One of the Emir's staff now stepped forward and took charge of the question. "One!" he shouted; and as the prisoner neither spoke nor moved, the Provost Marshal's men slashed off his ears and his nose. Not a groan escaped the prisoner.

"Two!" he shouted; and within two minutes more, the wretch was flung on the ground, and his eyes were gouged out in sight of his shuddering comrades.

Silence ensued, broken only by the moans of the sufferer with his muttered prayer to the Mother of God, and the stifled groans of the two who were waiting the same fate.

"Three!" and all around held their breath to listen: but no sound passed the Chian's lips, and he bit his lip to choke his

moan. A deathly pause followed. "Christ receive me," muttered the man. Then, with a sign from the captain, a scimitar crashed through the victim's neck, and his mutilated head rolled to the feet of his companions in agony.

The sickening scene was repeated with the second Chian, who suffered and died with the same stoical silence.

But as his head rolled towards the Thessalonian prisoner and covered him with blood, the courage of the third man gave way, and with a shriek he offered to disclose all he knew.

A long and close examination, carried on with no small persuasion from the instruments of torture and mutilation so liberally displayed by the Provost Marshal and his men, at length wrung from the prisoner a full and fairly accurate description of the forces led by Nicephorus, and also of the place and time in which they might be expected to disembark.

The Emir now called a council of war; and giving his lieutenants his final orders, sent mounted men in every direction to marshal his host for the coming struggle. The bay, with its sandy beach on which the prisoners had been brought ashore, seemed the spot where the Christian host would attempt to land. And Abd-el-Aziz with promptitude and skill arranged his forces in a circle round the amphitheatre which commanded the bay. He had hardly finished his dispositions when the great fleet was descried in the offing, as in three separate squadrons it bore down to concentrate in the bay. Shouts of triumph, war-songs from a thousand throats, chants to Allah and the name of His Prophet, mingled with the sound of horses and camels and the orders and incitements of the Emirs in command.

Slowly and in uniform mass the Roman fleet moved on, till it filled the entire bay, and came so near the shore that the voices of the captains could be heard on land. The huge Chelandion, *The Archangel Michael*, the flagship of the commander, was in the centre, and from it there was now sent forth a powerful barge propelled by twenty-four oarsmen, on which stood Nicephorus in person to direct the entire movement. For a space both mighty hosts waited in silence, watching for the first opportunity to strike. Then Nicephorus, bare-headed and unarmed, for he had laid aside his helmet, corselet, greaves, and his spear and sword, stood up at the prow of his barge, and, raising his hands aloft and gazing upwards to heaven, offered in the sight of Christian and Infidel his solemn dedication of his force to Christ.

"Almighty Creator of this Thy universe, behold the army of

Thy people at the frontier of Thy enemies. Look down on them, Thou who canst destroy with a breath the thousand towers of the ungodly. Strengthen the hearts of Thy chosen soldiers. Root out from them any craven fear. Bring to shame the promises of the false Prophets who set themselves against Thee. Show forth this day who is the true Peter, and who is the author of false lies. Make manifest, O Lord, who it is that is the camel-driver, who is the whoremonger, who is the contriver of all craft and abomination!"

Such was the prayer reported in the iambics of Theodosius the Deacon, who was present in the expedition as Chaplain on the High Admiral's flagship, and was full of thoughts to adorn the immortal Iliad he designed on the "Capture of Crete" in five cantos, which have come down to us after a thousand years. And in the same veracious poem we learn that the Ever-Victorious Commander of the Crusade then caused himself to be fully armed. He put on his golden corselet and plumed helmet, and equipped with his buckler and mighty spear, he bade the oarsmen row his barge along the line of battleships, whilst he thus addressed his men in that voice of thunder which they knew and loved:—

"Soldiers, captains, my friends, my children, fellow-servants of the Most High, ye who are the sinews of Rome and liegemen of our Sovereign Lord the King, look at this fair shore and island, with its rich and fragrant pastures, valleys, hills, and bright towns—once all these were part and parcel of our Rome, our Fatherland—once they were in the realm of our King. Once, I say, in years gone by, till sloth and vice betrayed them to the enemy, drove out our people and gave them to the Infidel. Charge these barbarians then with a stout heart. Take their cities with your swords. Take their women, take their children, and their children's children. Ye have nothing to fear from their puny darts. Ye need not be amazed if they draw your blood. Wash out your sins with the red blood of the misbelievers—these blaspheming savages. They who fall will be honoured by our Lord and Master, who will amply provide for their women and children. This is my last word, men! Hold your shields firm and close. Clench your spears well in front. Show yourselves true sons of Rome. Let not that great name be put to shame by you!"

Whilst the Chief had been speaking, the Saracen battalions had rapidly drawn down to the shore, and were now arrayed

in long dense lines round the bay, both horse and foot, prepared to contest the landing; but their javelins were not powerful enough to reach the ships.

"Bowmen, advance!" now roared the Admiral; and a hundred captains re-echoed the order along the line. Instantly a swarm of barges advanced with long sweeps to the beach, each holding fifty bowmen from the Thracian and Dyrrachian highlands, armed with the most effective weapons of that age. These poured upon the Saracens' lines a rain of arrows and bolts so dense and deadly that it completely broke the ranks of the defenders. They fell back sullenly from bank to bank, leaving the shore strewn with dead and wounded men, horses, camels, and mules.

The gallant Emir now re-formed his broken forces on a higher range of hills, just out of bow-shot from the ships. Then they beheld the advance of the main Christian host. The ships were driven straight on to the sandy shore, and from them descended masses of heavy-armed foot-soldiers, with round bucklers, long spears and massive battle-axes. Forming up in close phalanx, these Macedonian guards, in hauberk and round helmets, fixed shield to shield like an iron wall, and advanced in dense array to the charge. They were led on the right wing by the Russians and Norsemen of the Imperial Guard, whose huge stature, fair long hair, and gleaming halberds formed a strange contrast to the lighter arms of the swarthy and wiry children of the desert.

On came the Roman phalanx without a pause, for the slighter javelins and missiles of the Saracen could make but small impression on the closely-locked wall of the Varangian shields. In the midst of each battalion was seen a bishop with his canons in stole, alb, and chasuble, bearing aloft a crucifix of gold, ornamented with jewels and enamel, and a fragment of the true Cross. They broke forth into a hymn to the Mother of God, whom they invoked to lead them on to victory. And in the hymn the mailed infantry of Rome joined; and from ten thousand throats broke forth the prayer to Christ to aid His soldiers against the miscreant railers of His Holy Name. So they marched steadily on to the foot of the hills, whereon the Hagarenes were massed. Then at the sound of "Charge," with fierce yells and shouts of "Rome," "Christ," and "Mary," they rushed up the heights, the warlike and poetic Deacon tells us, "like mountain lions," in his enthusiasm as he watched them from his barge.

The lighter army of the Emir could not stand the shock of this tremendous phalanx, so far heavier in men, arms, and numbers; and with all their courage and skill they wavered and fell back. Then a sight, strange, indeed, to these children of the desert, struck wonder and dismay into their ranks. It was a new device to which Nicephorus and his engineers had given all their thoughts. The bulky transports of shallow draught on which the cavalry had been stowed, were driven ashore till they grounded on the sand. Their bulwarks opened, and from them were lowered by cranes broad and stout bridges which had been slung to the masts, so as to form a gangway from the deck to the beach. Thence poured out dense squadrons of cavalry fully equipped with lance and mail. They scoured the plain from end to end as they slew the broken fugitives and the helpless wounded. Foremost amongst these terrible horsemen were the *Cataphracti* or cuirassiers, mostly Sarmatians or Anatolians, from the Asian steppes, clad in close-fitting coats and greaves of mail from head to foot, and using alternately the bow, the sword, the light lance, and a small round shield. These nimble and expert troopers cut up the broken ranks of the Saracens, trampled down all who had turned to fly, and left no living thing on the field where they had passed.

In the midst of the roar of battle the poetic Deacon clung to the Commander-in-Chief, who now on his charger, and with his staff, commanded the cavalry in person. It was even now his chief care to prevent his forces, in their heat, from becoming too far scattered over the broken country. He knew that, with his vast fleet of transports and barges, the sea was a danger greater than the Saracen army. This was now effectually repelled and shattered. The whole ground they had occupied was strewn with their dead. Far as the eye could see, every village was in flames, and every post of the enemy was sacked and levelled. Galloping to the nearest homestead, Nicephorus sternly bade his men re-form in order to re-embark. He ordered them to cease the wanton slaughter of women and children, whom the Sarmatians and Anatolians were engaged in massacring like sheep. With his own hand he cut down a ferocious Cappadocian whom he saw in the act of hacking to pieces an infant.

At this moment the General was attracted by the shrieks of a woman who dashed out of one of the houses, the roof of which was already on fire. She was closely pursued by a band

of wild irregular horsemen from the Caucasian border, who, furious and blood-stained, were following her like hounds after their prey. Her dress, which had been that of the Moors, was torn in shreds, and only half concealed her fair limbs and graceful form. She rushed screaming to the presence of the General, whom she addressed in gasps, but in the pure Greek tongue. "Save me, keep back these wretches!" she cried. "I am a Roman, the daughter of a senator, and a worshipper of Christ and His Mother." "Who art thou, my daughter?" said the Chief. "I am Theodora, the only child of Cedrenus, once Governor of Cappadocia. I was captured by corsairs whilst on a voyage across the Ægean Sea to join my father, dragged to this island, where I have been for two years the slave of the Emir Nazireddin, whose house these savage men have sacked and burned."

"Hast thou forsworn Christ and His Holy Mother?" asked the Chief.

"Never have I done so in thought, word, or deed, most noble lord, though I have been forced to submit to the indignities, and to listen to the blasphemies of these unbelievers. My master, who had wives of his own creed, cared little what were the thoughts of a slave, or what were her prayers."

"Are there many Roman women, Christians and virtuous, in like case?"

"There are hundreds in every town along the coast who have been seized in ships at sea, or carried off from the storming of a seaport in the Empire. This island must now contain at least twenty thousand Roman women such as I am, forced to wear the garb of Islam, and to serve the followers of the Prophet—all young, for the rest they kill off at sight as useless encumbrances."

"Go in safety and in honour, my daughter," said Nicephorus gently, "these officers of mine shall see to your protection." His brow darkened, and he called round him his chief officers and secretaries. "See that this orgy be stopped, and bring back my army to our ships. This Christian and innocent girl is the daughter of my friend and comrade—whose soul may God receive in mercy; and she was like to be outraged and massacred by my own men under my very eyes. Our work in the Lord is not half done until we save and rescue these miserable daughters of our people, and bring them back to our country and to Christ."

Nicephorus, whose life had been passed in continual battle with the sons of Hagar, was far from sharing in the wild exultation of his soldiers; nor did he at all believe that his first victory, however brilliant, was enough to complete the campaign. He well knew the courage, the resolution, the fanaticism of the Saracens of the East, and especially of the race which had held Crete for nearly a century and a half against all the power of Rome. He took up fortified positions on the northern coast, supported by his fleet, which blockaded every port. He sent forth strong detachments to secure the principal centres. And he despatched a powerful force of cavalry and mounted infantry under Pastilas, a general of valour and experience, into the heart of the island, with strict orders to keep constant watch both day and night against surprises, and to practise the utmost caution against the wiles of the treacherous foe.

A terrible blow justified his warning. For days Pastilas had been sending dispatches to report that his squadrons had swept everything before them, and had seized immense booty, horses, camels, cattle, provisions, and valuables without limit, and were concentrating in the great central plain, whence they would dominate the whole island.

Nicephorus sat late one night in his tent pondering his plans with a map and studying reports of his scouts, when his officers gave notice of a mounted messenger advancing at a gallop. In a moment the horseman, bedraggled, torn, and bleeding as he was, flung himself from his foaming and exhausted mount, and threw himself down before the Chief.

"A great disaster, my Lord General, an ambush, a rout of our force, of which I am one of the few survivors. Our commander and all his officers slain. Everything and every man the prey of the Hagarenes. They drew our whole force into a trap, as it passed through a wooded defile, and surrounded us on every side. Pastilas died fighting like a lion at bay. But his entire command is destroyed, save a few fugitives, of whom I am one!"

"And my orders?" said the Chief. "Where were the scouts, the outposts—the eyes of the General?"

"It is not for me, a plain captain of the *Defensors*, with the reserve, stationed far to the rear, whence I could see and learn little, to pass judgment on my commander. And I fear me much that no one of his officers in the main battle survives.

Pastilas had captured and dispersed scores of the enemy's detachments, had swept the land without a check, had seized horses, stores, slaves, women, wines, and gold; and his men could not be held from revelry, riot, and sloth."

Nicephorus listened in silence with lips drawn tight, and breathing hard. He dismissed the messenger with a gesture, and groaned to himself: "Thus was Crete lost to Rome by our ancestors. Thus will Rome be lost to Christ, unless His people turn their hearts to understand the desperate war they have to wage with the False Prophet. A brave man was Pastilas, who has served Rome and God right well until this day. May he find mercy above! On earth he will be remembered as one who brought this cause a second time to the verge of ruin."

The Chief had hardly over-estimated the gravity of the situation. The Saracen hosts were now all drawn into their vast central Citadel of Chandax, whence they issued in continual sorties and raids both by day and night. The tremendous fortress was closely beleaguered. But the strain of so great a siege wore down the Roman army, decimated by three successive blows—the overwhelming of Pastilas with the flower of the cavalry, next the incessant sorties and ambuscades, and lastly fever, cold, and want of food. The magnificent host that had set forth so proudly in midsummer from the Golden Horn had dwindled to a third in the winter, and the immense stores it carried were exhausted. The Saracen stronghold was indeed at its last extremity. But all through that terrible winter, it was hard to say if the defenders or the besiegers were in the worst plight, or were the nearer to famine and exhaustion. Easter of 961 A.D. was at hand when, at the urgent demand of Nicephorus, a new levy was sent out with adequate supplies under the command of Basil Digenes, the Akritas, the chivalrous Warden of the Marches. It was, indeed, sorely needed.

The vast stronghold of the Saracens of Crete looked as proud and as menacing as ever. Chandax—so named from the fosse, within which the first Mussulman conquerors of the island had entrenched themselves one hundred and thirty years before—rose from a precipitous rock overhanging the northern coast of the island; and in successive generations it had been raised to be one of the most powerful fortresses of the Eastern world. Its huge walls were defended with a long chain of lofty towers, from the battlements of which swarthy bowmen shot down

every living thing that approached the circuit, whilst the gates and posterns would suddenly pour forth by day or by night bands of light horse or foot which harassed the camp, burned the engines, and cut off the pickets.

The Moslem fortress was now closely invested and cut off from all succour by a range of trenches and earthworks running round it from sea to sea. And it was attacked night and day by every device known to the siege-train of the tenth century —an art in which the Byzantines had preserved and greatly extended the traditions and machines of old Rome. All attempts to scale the lofty curtain with ladders had been beaten off with fearful loss, after desperate combats at all hours of day or night. Protected by mantlets, hurdles wattled with osiers and covered with hides, the besiegers had pushed on their works close up to the walls, which they now battered with huge rams and pierced with sharp-headed bores. The rams were worked each by some sixty men, who were protected by a pent-house of timber covered with hides. The "bore" had already loosened blocks in the base of the wall. But the defenders within continually crushed the "ram" or "bore" with massive stones, or seized the head with forked beams, which caught it in a vice, whilst the rain of missiles from above, with boiling pitch and every form of combustible, cut down the assailants and destroyed their engines. The losses within the city were equally severe. Protected by pent-houses like the "rams" and "bores," but further behind their earthworks, the Romans plied their huge "catapults," which hurled masses of rock and iron into the fortress, keeping up an incessant bombardment. They also used the *balista*, an immense fixed cross-bow, which shot bolts with extraordinary force and precision upon the battlements, whereon nothing living could stand exposed without certain destruction.

From morn till night the Commander-in-Chief with his principal officers inspected the works, ordered some new device, or searched for some weak spot in the defence. It was after a strenuous day in the seventh month of the siege, as the sun was setting in crimson glory behind the spurs of Mount Ida, that Nicephorus and his trusted Digenes Akritas were watching the success of a new engine of assault that had been prepared with great pains. It was a tower of three stages constructed of massive beams protected by frames and hides and crowned with a stout roof. It was now being rolled forward on broad

wheels to afford means of scaling the walls. The assault at this moment was a terrific sight. The catapults and *balistæ* were pouring out on the ramparts stones, bolts, and bombs filled with the famous "Greek fire." The earthworks of the besiegers were garnished with poles, on which stood impaled the ghastly heads of Saracens slain in the sorties. From time to time, the ferocious ribaldry of the camp led the brutal soldiery to hurl into the city these grinning trophies of their slaughter to appal their living comrades. The horrid jest of this day had been to hurl from the largest of the catapults a living mule, in derision of the famine within the citadel; and the Roman army roared with delight as the wretched brute dashed quivering down upon the loftiest tower.

Nicephorus and his staff anxiously watched the slow advance of the great wooden turret filled with troops ready to swing bridges, planks, and ladders on to the rampart. The whizzing of the missiles, the shouts of the Romans, answered by barbaric yells from the walls, the roar of the flames as, one after another, the engines of the defenders or of the assailants caught fire, made a truly infernal din. "See, General," called out the Warden of the Marches, "the turret is within twenty feet of the wall, and on a level with the rampart—fifteen!—ten feet! Down with the scaling bridge!" he roared. And crashing went the gangway from the front of the pent-house. But as he spoke the soft earth in the newly-filled fosse whereon the turret stood gave way. The gangway fell short: the turret toppled and split. The besiegers hurled on it bolts, rocks, boiling pitch, and fire-balls. And presently it collapsed with a sudden crash, and fell in a heap, mangling and burying the men inside it and beneath it. And at once it blazed up a huge mass of burning timber. "No!" said the Field-Marshal, "as I feared, no turret lofty enough to overtop these walls can be brought up to work on such a ground as this. If rams and turrets fail us, we must fall back on resort to a mine."

The destruction of the great movable turret, on the success of which such hopes and fears had been placed, caused the ranks of assailants and defenders to pause for a space, whilst both were watching the effect of the blazing pile. A lull ensued in the storm of battle, which was interrupted by a strange incident such as the superstition of that age invested with supernatural effect. On the battlement of the topmost tower there now appeared the gaunt dishevelled figure of the wild

woman who had long been known to both armies as the "Witch of Nejd." The Saracens devoutly believed, and the Christians with terror admitted that, by intercourse with the infernal powers, and by incantations that she inherited from Sabæan and pagan ancestors, she could work spells on those whom she devoted to her Satanic spirits. Her long black hair hung round her loosely in wild folds. Her bony arms held aloft a brazier, into which she dropped aromatic drugs; and her loose robes floated in the wind, as she shrieked out her maledictions on the Christian soldiers beneath.

"Blaspheming followers of the Nazarene," she screamed, "see the foretaste of the blazing ruin that awaits your souls, even as fire is now consuming your ruined turret. Each flash from this pan is the answer of my Lord, the mighty Sheitan of the world below, that ye and yours, your women, your children, your cattle, and your goods, shall be utterly consumed. And you, proud, bloody, lecherous Emir of the Nazarenes, you shall be slaughtered like an ox on your own bed by the foul woman to whom you have sold yourself. In the name of the Prince of Hell, I devote you all to death on this field, and to burning torment in the world to come!"

"Shoot down the crazy crone," cried the Lord Digenes; "who need listen to her raving? Why do the dogs cower at the screaming of a mad gipsy?" But not a man stirred. The guards, the officers, even the General himself felt a thrill of awe, which they could neither explain nor suppress.

Silence ensued, till it was broken by the yells of the maniac, who had now worked herself up into a delirious spasm, which in that age passed for the inspiration of one possessed by demons. Leo the Deacon and Theodosius the Deacon devoutly believed in her diabolic mission. Both solemnly relate the tale.

Again she screamed aloud—"Accursed are ye, sons of the Crucified Impostor—your bolts cannot harm me, the chosen paramour of Sheitan himself, nor can your lying priests, nor the wanton, the Mother of your God, avail to save you. See me stand bare and unprotected in the sight of your rotten shafts, bare even as when my Lord from Hell visits me; you cannot touch a hair of my head nor the skin of my body. Shame, death, torment is your portion here and hereafter. *Seeph—Echeimat—Ischarop—Rhasan—Sermet—Midene—Chaët—Iphesane!*"

With these words, which no man in the Roman host could comprehend, but which Theodosius solemnly rehearses, words which sounded to them as the knell of their souls' damnation, the maniac fell into a series of convulsions. And thrice repeating her "*Seeph—echeimat*," she leapt on to the upper battlement; and then tore off her garments, which she flung down in derision into the blazing heap below, and there stood shrieking in face of the two armies, covered only with her long black tresses.

"Shoot the blaspheming witch," cried a voice here and there; and many an archer raised his bow, but with the fear of the Powers of Darkness on his heart drew back, without daring to take aim.

"*Seeph!—echeimat!*" was yelled out a third time. And at last an archer (it is said from the Mongol mercenaries, who held Moslem or Christian mysteries equally cheap) levelled his weapon steadily at the witch as she stood with her bare body lighted up by the blazing pile below. The shaft pierced her breast. And with a shriek that rang through the Moslem fortress and the Christian camp, the hag fell headlong from the tower into the burning mass of the fallen turret, and was there consumed to ashes—almost before the blood had ceased to flow from the corpse.

CHAPTER XI

THE STORMING OF CHANDAX

THE strange scene had so deeply stirred the vague awe of the Romans and so fully engaged their attention, that in the gloom which followed the dying down of the great fire they suffered themselves to be surprised by a sudden sally of the Saracens. A light band, stealing out from a concealed postern, dashed upon the advanced works and nearly captured Nicephorus with his immediate staff. Basil Digenes, who had taken personal command of the ruined turret, was actually surrounded; and after desperate feats of valour in hand-to-hand combats, was struck down, wounded, and dragged back a prisoner into the Moslem fortress. There he was thrown into a dungeon in the great tower which served as head-quarters of one of the chief Emirs, to await question by the chief of the staff himself. He strove to destroy any vestige of clothing or accoutrement which could betray his rank or name. For he well knew that if the Moslems discovered that he was the son of the renegade Emir of Edessa, he would suffer a more horrid death than that which, in any case, was his almost certain fate. Through the long hours of darkness he lay on the stony floor, sore and stiff with his untended wounds, and he faced the worst with a brave heart, calling upon Mary in heaven, but thinking of Agatha on earth.

Beneath the narrow grating of the slit in the wall of his cell he could hear the tramp of guards in the courtyard, and as he had retained enough of his father's native speech to follow the Arab tongue, he listened to rude jests about the fate which awaited him when questioned by the Emir, and loud disputes as to whether he was an ordinary guardsman of the capital or any officer of rank. "He is not tall enough to be one of those accursed Russ," said one fellow. "I saw on his side the baldric of a 'spathaire,' as they call their Emirs," said another. "I tell you, he had a ruby ring," cried a third, "but some

Syrian thief had stolen it before I seized him," said the last. "We shall know all about it, at any rate, when 'Black Malek' and his singeing tools has begun to loose his tongue!" And the coarse shout with which this sally was received rang harshly in the young hero's ears.

It was still as dark as pitch when a faint streak of light seemed to glimmer around the barred door; and the keen ear of the Lord Warden detected the slow movement of the bolt, as if it were being cautiously drawn back. Was he to be assassinated quietly in his sleep? If so, well! Thanks be for this to the Virgin Mother and the Saints! He closed his eyes and feigned to sleep, with a muttered prayer to be received in mercy by Christ in heaven. Presently he was aware of two figures stealthily approaching him. "He sleeps soundly," said a voice in whispers. "Allah be praised!" whispered another voice, which sounded to the listener strangely like that of a woman. "Lift up the lantern, nurse, the wound I saw on him was a deep gash in the left shoulder made by a blow which had shorn away his vest." By the light of a horn lantern the prisoner could dimly perceive standing over him the figure of a black Nubian woman who had sponge, bandages, and liniment with her, and was stooping down to dress the wound. Digenes forced himself to lie still and feign deep sleep in order to hear more of this unexpected visit.

"Ah! Is the young Nazarene dead?" came with a sigh from the other woman who had stood behind the door, but now came forward sufficiently to let the prisoner perceive a young and beautiful girl in the most elegant dress of a Saracen lady of high rank. "Is he dead, nurse?" she sighed again. "Not dead, no!—nor like to die, my sweet mistress—not until his Excellency, your father, gives the word—as I suppose he will at daybreak."

"Tend him now, at least," said the lady. And the Nubian, with her strong arms and practised skill, bathed, soothed, and bandaged the wound, whilst the patient still maintained his semblance of slumber, eager as he was to understand what miracle could have won for him, as it seemed, the protection of the Emir's daughter, who was evidently now stooping to look at his face in the dim half light.

"What is it can lead you, my darling lady, to bring help to this cruel Giaour who is fighting against God and His Prophet—one, too, whom your own father will assuredly put to a just

death, when he has wrung from him all that he knows about the unbelieving host?"

"Hush, nurse, do what I tell you. I saw our men last night as they brought in this prisoner from the fight. Behind our lattice I could see his look, and was struck with amazement at what I saw. He is the very image of my own beloved brother, Hassan, who was taken prisoner in the great battle round Tarsus and died in the castle of the Armenian chief who had captured him. But his last days were made peaceful by the care of the noble lord, who had blood relationship with our family. I have longed to do as much for some captive Giaour—and here is one whom I can save."

"Oh! my dearest foster-child, this is a strange delusion," said the slave woman.

"I tell you, nurse, he is the image of my dear dead brother. It is marvellous, it is incredible, it is some special will of God. This young Christian officer—I am sure he is an officer, of high rank—has the same dark eyes, the delicate features, the olive tint, the raven hair of my lost brother. I tell you, nurse, as I saw him dragged bleeding and haggard beneath my lattice, I thought I was looking on my brother, just before he breathed his last in the house of a kind Christian chief. It is not true, nurse, that they are all wicked and savage. There are Christian heroes as there are Moslem heroes, and I am fain to think this noble youth is one of them himself. In any case, he shall not die if I can save him for my brother's sake."

"Thanks, gracious lady, for that word. We are not all savage, as your brother found us, and as your heart tells you," murmured the Akritas, in the sweetest intonation which he could give to such Arabic speech as he still retained.

The maiden started up and rushed towards the door, in her amazement and confusion, when she heard such words in her own tongue from one whom but a moment before she believed to be in his last sleep. "Nay, fly not, gentle maiden, fear nothing, I am your helpless and grateful prisoner. But I, too, have known how to soothe the dying hours of an enemy, a gallant Saracen; and from my own father I have the blood and the speech of an Emir as my inheritance—aye, and, I trust, something still of the honour of that noble chief in my soul. Fear me not, lady, help me to die in peace, even as, in my father's castle, I eased the dying hours of the young Hassan, the son of my own father's sister."

"What is this? Speak, who are you then, if no Giaour, and how come you to be in arms against our people and our faith?"

"Lady, the Hassan whose eyes I closed, and whom I buried with the honours due to a gallant chief, was my own kinsman in blood, for I am the only child of the Emir of Edessa, Mousour, who forsook Islam when he wedded the daughter of Prince Dukas."

"What!" cried the girl, quite beside herself with wonder and excitement; "you are then cousin-german to my own loved brother. You are the lord who protected him. This, then, is how it came to pass that when I saw you I thought that my brother himself had returned to earth and was before me. Praise be to Allah, for, in spite of your faith and mine, we are of one blood, and your father and my mother were brother and sister of one house; and Allah in His mercy has brought us at last together, so that blood of yours shall not lie at our door after all, if the word of Fatima can suffice to prevent this crime."

Crimson with blushes and panting with excitement, as the terrible nature of her promise struck her mind, the Saracen maiden fell on her knees before the prisoner; and taking his right hand in hers she raised it solemnly to her lips, as she uttered to her God a silent vow. Then she gave the hand she still held a gentle but meaning pressure, and rose up in haste.

"Come, nurse, haste, bring these things away. There is much to be done. Everything has to be arranged within an hour. Prisoner, who stood friend to Hassan in prison, remember that Hassan's sister will be friend to you, or will die in the attempt."

The fair Fatima in fact persuaded her father that, her Nubian nurse having been summoned to save the prisoner's life that he might be questioned, it had been ascertained that he had Saracen blood in his veins, but had been brought up from youth amongst the Giaours. If he were carefully nursed back to life, and his wounds dressed, he might be led to return to the faith of his Moslem ancestors, and would then prove of great service to the defence by what he could reveal. The Emir, absorbed in the cares of his desperate situation, and having no reason to suppose that he had in his power a prisoner of importance, consented to the man remaining in his dungeon, under guard, and permitted the Nubian nurse to visit and care for his life, if she had any means of so doing.

When it was supposed that the prisoner was sufficiently restored to bear examination, he was carried, chained to two stout guards, into the audience chamber of the Emir-in-Chief, Abd-el-Aziz, whom the Byzantine historians call the Kouropas—a curious corruption of Curopalates, which itself is a corruption of *Curator Palatii*, or Lord High Chamberlain. The Kouropas was seated on a curiously-carved throne in a hall hung with arms, Persian carpets, and embroidery, and was surrounded by a fierce band of officers and orderlies. He had already ordered the execution of some prisoners taken in the late sortie, and Digenes was about to be dragged into his presence, when an officer rushed forward to announce that the envoys he had dispatched at the beginning of the siege to the Caliph Abderrahman in Cordova were just returning with ambassadors from the great Ommeyad, the powerful Sovereign of the West. As the city of Chandax was so closely invested, the Spanish Moors had only with great difficulty and hairbreadth escapes found their way to the walls ; and at last they had been drawn up to the ramparts in baskets hung out over the fosse by a crane. The Kouropas ordered them at once to be admitted with all possible ceremony, and rose to do honour to the representatives of his powerful fellow-believer, and, as he hoped, his ally.

After the customary salaams and exchange of compliments, the ambassadors were seated and opened their business, to which Digenes listened, as he was thrust aside behind a throng of guards and officials. The two envoys of Abderrahman reported that their lord and master had dispatched them from Andalusia in two of his swiftest cruisers to ascertain the condition of their brethren in Crete. They had been shocked to find to how terrible a strait they were reduced. The Giaour was master of the whole island. Far and wide the Saracen cities had been sacked and occupied. The land had been ravaged, and the bones and goods of the true believers lay scattered over the fields. Chandax itself was closely invested, and was on every side being bombarded with powerful engines. They saw with horror and pity as they passed through the streets crowds of country people who had taken refuge within its walls—old men, women, and children, in sore destitution, pinched with cold and hunger, and cumbering the market-place with dead and dying. And, even whilst they were trying to force their way through the Giaour lines outside, they had witnessed a ghastly scene. A helpless crowd of infirm men,

children reduced to the state of skeletons, and women dragging moaning infants beside them, were forced out of the city as "useless mouths," driven as sheep are hunted by wolves, to the enemies' lines; from which again they were forced back by the bloody Nazarenes with curses, blows, and weapons, so that they lay down gasping in the trenches now reeking with rotting bodies of men and beasts. It was a hideous sight. And however anxious was the Caliph of the West to succour his kinsmen and fellow-believers in the Prophet, it seemed hopeless to enter on so desperate an enterprise in a crisis so appalling.

"Noble envoys of the great Caliph in Andalusia," said Abd-el-Aziz, "we are indeed sore bested, but our case is not yet hopeless. We are reduced to a remnant of fighting men: but we are sworn to defend this city or die. And to keep a remnant alive and fit for arms, we have to sacrifice those who cannot fight. They, too, are martyrs to our faith, and God in His mercy will not suffer them to perish for ever. There is still hope left; for we learned but a few days ago that the Imaum of West Africa has succeeded in landing a large force of gallant Moors, who even now are advancing with haste, and will attack the unbelievers in the rear."

"If ye can maintain your defence yet two months longer," said the Spanish envoys, "our master will endeavour to give you succour or offer you a refuge. His fleets scour the western sea from the island of Sicily: but he is not yet prepared to make war on the Sovereign of Roum."

But at this moment a fresh dispatch reached the Kouropas, to the effect that by a sudden night march Nicephorus had fallen unawares on the African army of relief; had surprised them in their tents and bivouac, and had annihilated the entire command, and taken all their stores, arms, and munitions of war.

A spasm of rage, grief, and disappointment ran through the council when this news was made known; and the hall was a scene of frenzied excitement and almost of panic as they saw how the wisdom of the politic Abderrahman was justified, how little could be hoped from the side of the Spanish Caliphate.

The Kouropas rose with an air of heroic resolution and calmed the storm. "Illustrious envoys of the mighty Caliph of the West, Emirs, officers, and soldiers of the Prophet—we have sworn to defend this city of the true believers to the last drop of our blood. If the great ones of our faith in Spain, in Asia, or in Africa come not to our help, we Moslems of Crete will

fight the Nazarene whilst we can hold our swords. We will never be slaves to the foul brood that eats swine, that worships stones and painted boards, that prostrates itself to a wanton. Sons of Islam, if we are to die, let us prepare for the Galilean a bloody victory."

In the meantime the Roman Commander-in-Chief, sore grieved at the loss of his young Lieutenant-General, the Akritas, and made anxious by the determined energy of the enemy and his own daily losses, was indefatigable in his efforts to force the siege to a triumphant end. He was now pressing on the device of a mine, since he found that his movable turrets could not overtop the wall, nor his "rams" or his "bores" suffice to shake it. For a month his engineers had been at work on a deep mine beneath the curtain that lay between two principal towers, where at last he had detected a soil soft enough to be pierced by mining. The main circuit of the wall rested on impenetrable rock; but now he had found a bit which, with incessant labour, it was possible to traverse. A vast subterranean chamber was now prepared, supported only on beams, which, on the appointed day, could be destroyed by fire.

It was now ready for the great assault; and during the night the whole Roman forces had been marshalled in their respective posts. The catapults and *balistæ* were plied with new vehemence. The air rang with missiles of every kind—rocks, bolts, darts, and bombs of Greek fire. Nicephorus traversed the ranks, calling on his men to smite these blaspheming sons of the concubine—these Ishmaelites, who eat unclean camel's flesh, and pollute themselves with a multitude of women, who revile Christ and His Mother, who murder the innocent, and practise all the abominations of the great impostor. Christ and His Holy Mother would welcome in heaven all who fell in this sacred war against the Infidel, and their King in Rome would honour and reward them on earth.

His engineers now reported to the General that the great mine was quite ready to be fired when the order should be given. Thereupon Nicephorus ordered a solemn service to be performed. He had caused an army of artificers to be sent from Constantinople, who had raised a church in an incredibly short time (Michael of Attala, the historian, solemnly tells us that it was miraculously built in three days). It was placed in the rear of the camp behind an eminence which concealed it

from the city. It was a miniature Hagia Sophia, with a spherical dome, marble columns, bronze doors, and mosaic pictures similar to the old Byzantine churches still standing in Greece. It was, of course, dedicated to the Immaculate Virgin, and it was filled with emblems and figures of the warrior saints; but it long bore the popular name given to it by the soldiers—the "Church of the Lord General." There Nicephorus was wont to worship daily. But on this eventful day he chose to attend the service with more than ordinary state. In his most resplendent uniform, with his gilt corselet, his plumed helmet, and burnished greaves, he called round him his principal officers and the entire body of the priests and chaplains of the army. From the church he issued forth in a brilliant procession, both military and sacerdotal. On his white charger he rode forth, followed by his staff, and surrounded by priests, choristers, and acolytes, bearing the golden crucifixes, incense, miraculous *ikons*, and the host in chased *ciboria* of gold and jewels. General and priests visited each post and detachment in turn. The priests pronounced absolution and gave the holy wafer, and offered to the fervid kisses of the soldiers on their knees the relics of martyrs in their *encolpia*, the jewelled lockets they carried hung by chains round their necks.

Nicephorus again harangued them, galloping from post to post. "Their royal master, Romanus, had offered rewards of valour to all who should distinguish themselves. These holy servants of Christ here, with the bones of martyrs and the body and blood of their Saviour in their hands, promised the palm of martyrs and the glory of heaven to all who should fall in the fight. Smite these black sons of the False Prophet, these revilers of God's name, these miscreants who commit their abominations to-day in the holy spot where Mary our Mother first laid on earth the Divine Child, begotten of the Father; nay, they polluted the hallowed sepulchre wherein the apostles laid their crucified Lord and Master. Smite and spare them not, sons of Rome and followers of Christ, even as the children of Israel smote the sons of Amalek and the brood of Goliath. Smite—for God in heaven with His Holy Ones this very hour is looking down on each of you from heaven above."

And then Nicephorus, carried beyond himself into something like religious illusion, broke into a rhapsody which raised the enthusiasm of his men to white heat. "I see," he cried, "the heaven opening before my eyes. There sits in glory the

Immaculate Mother of God: I see her smile on you the assurance of her divine protection!" The Chief dismounted, and, taking off his helmet, he prostrated himself thrice on the bare rock, as if he stood before the altar of God. Then rising, and raising his hands in an attitude of adoration, he cried, "See the Blessed Mary of Victory as she beckons us to march against the Infidel! See Christ, the Son, the Creator of heaven and earth, raising His holy hands to bless you, and to promise you His help. See! around the Saviour stand there Saint Demetrius and Saint George, both in golden cuirass, Saint Theodore, and the Archangel Michael, with his flaming sword. Soldiers, Romans, Christians! can ye not see the white wings of the mighty Archangel beating the air as he sweeps on in front of your lines? Can ye not see the flaming sword that led the angels on to victory against the rebel crew of Satan, as it points to you the path to victory and to glory?"

A deep and muffled roar ran along the Roman lines as the General resumed his helmet and his charger; for in that age of imaginative excitement and religious passion, the troops were as easily brought to believe they saw in the white clouds, tinted with the morning sun, the figures of the celestial host, as truly as their commander in his zealous trance had believed himself to have seen them. The strain on the mind of Nicephorus, who alone knew the intense crisis of that moment, was almost unbearable. He had just sent the order to spring the mine by firing the props of timber. As he rode forward to watch the issue an appalling crash rent the sky. The two main towers heaved, toppled, and fell in masses into the fosse below, dragging with them nearly the whole of the curtain of wall between them, with battlements, engines, and defenders in one ghastly heap, and from the fragments clouds of dust rose up, which covered both the city within and the attacking forces without.

And now, before they could see each other, swarms of wild Saracens rushed forth over the *débris*, and from the gates of the city, suddenly thrown wide open. Haggard Dervishes in white vests flung themselves madly on the Roman spears. Arab horsemen, on foaming chargers, dashed into the advancing columns; turbaned Emirs, in gleaming coats of mail, frantically cheered on their men to slay the dogs who ate swine's flesh and reviled the Prophet, promising the gold of the Infidel camp to

those who survived and the houris of Paradise to those who fell. Abd-el-Aziz, the Commander-in-Chief, passed from one corner of the field to the other, whilst the gigantic Emir Ben-Senoussi, the captor of Digenes, and the father of Fatima, charged full at Nicephorus himself. The tremendous duel for an instant arrested the attention of both sides. Spurring his powerful charger to his utmost speed, and couching his lance, Ben-Senoussi rode at the General, who was now equipped in his full panoply. As the Bedaween bore down on him, Nicephorus caught the lance dexterously on his shield, and caused it to swerve aside without piercing the weapon. Then, as the huge Saracen came abreast of him, the General swung his mighty falchion straight on to the turban of his adversary and clove him in twain down to the chine.

With a roar of joy, and triumphant shouts of "Rome," "Mother of God," "Saint George," "Saint Theodore," the Roman army dashed on, slaying the Dervishes in heaps, and pouring over the fallen wall, and through the breach and the still open gates. The Kouropas had been swept back by the tide of victors and defeated in the *mêlée*, and still with heroic determination he directed the combat within the walls. It had now become a pitiless struggle from house to house, from one winding alley to another. All day long the bloody work raged on. As each house was stormed, all within it were massacred, and it was then burnt or destroyed. Neither age nor sex was spared. Portable valuables were seized; that which could not be carried was destroyed. Lust, rapine, slaughter, ruled unbridled. Violation did not save the women, who were victims of the licence, nor did innocence and helplessness avail to save the children of the accursed race. Hell was enacted in all its atrocities in the name of Christ and for the honour of the Immaculate Mother of God. Here and there was heard the voice of a priest chanting a hymn from the Psalm of David, "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." "The Lord shall swallow them up in His wrath, and the fire shall devour them." "O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed." "Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones."

Long did the infernal orgy of destruction, rape, torture, and murder run riot through the length and breadth of the doomed city of the Saracens. But in the afternoon, as the sun was

setting, the Generalissimo of the Romans succeeded in quelling the outbreak. He had been detained on the field in order to protect his own rear, which was threatened by some roving bands which had made a circuitous advance on to his camp. Now he rode into the thick of the street fight, ordering the promiscuous slaughter and destruction to cease. He directed tried officers of his own to collect and protect the booty seized, with orders to execute all soldiers taken in the act of rape, plunder, or massacre. Coming suddenly on a soldier in the very act of mutilating a girl whom he had already raped, the General ordered a sergeant to arrest him, have him flogged, and his nose cut off. As he passed on his officers reported that the soldier, with a bag of gold that he had just plundered, had bribed the sergeant to remit the punishment and let him escape free. Flagrant insubordination such as this always roused the passion of Nicephorus. He instantly ordered the same punishment to be inflicted on the sergeant which that officer had failed to execute on the original offender.

As he rode up to the gateway of one of the central habitations, the General found a group of fierce irregulars from the Euxine steppes attacking a man who was defending himself with nothing but a light buckler and a Saracen scimitar. He stood at bay with his back to the wall in a corner of the courtyard, apparently protecting a girl in Moorish dress, who lay fainting on the ground at his feet. The gallant swordsman, who looked more like an Arab than a Roman, was now bleeding from three wounds, and was nearly overpowered by the wild fellows who had surrounded them. "Back, you ruffians," he shouted in Greek; "I tell you I am a Roman, and an officer on the staff of your Commander, and have been a prisoner here in the enemies' dungeon." But the Tartars, who knew no Greek and judged him by his look and dress to be a Saracen, redoubled their strokes; and were on the point of completing their work by slaughtering him and ravishing the girl.

What was the amazement of Nicephorus when, in spite of the blood on the swordsman's face and his Saracen costume, he recognised his beloved Digenes Akritas, whom he saved in the last moment, driving back the Tartars with curses and threats.

"Arrest these miscreants," he shouted to the Provost Marshal, "who dishonour the victory of our Lord the King and shame the favour of our Virgin Mistress in heaven. Take this girl,

be she Moslem or Christian, and treat her in all honour. My beloved brother-in-arms, who art risen from the grave, they shall take you to my tent, and attend to your wounds. I must hasten forward to hold these demons in hand. Carry my orders to my captains as peremptory on pain of death to stay this massacre, and prevent further plunder and riot. Or Christ above and His Immaculate Mother will visit us sorely, in that we have turned the victory they have given us into abominations that the Infidels themselves could not surpass in sin."

CHAPTER XII

DIGENES AND FATIMA: ROMAN OR SARACEN

The energy and stern determination of the Lord General, whose iron discipline was feared by the wildest Mongol horsemen in his motley host, gradually restored order and regular government through the vast encampment of the victorious Romans. The immense treasures which Chandax contained, the plunder of a century and a half of rich and beautiful cities on the Ægean coast and its islands, were placed under adequate guards, and were carefully distributed into proper departments for sale, reward, or display. A portion was reserved to adorn the triumph of the General on his return to Constantinople. Other portions were set apart for the prize of the various commanders, squadrons, and soldiers who had actually taken part in the late battles. But far the largest portion was sold by auction at authorised marts for the benefit of the State, the officers, and the forces engaged.

The General himself from time to time would ride round the lines of cantonment to inspect the conduct of his officials and the behaviour of his men, and to satisfy himself that his orders were fulfilled to the letter. His staff and orderlies followed him in a brilliant cavalcade; and by his side was usually to be seen his beloved Digenes, the Warden of the Marches, now almost restored from the many wounds he had received from Saracen and from Roman, but still bearing a scar across his chiselled cheek, and with his left arm suspended in a silken scarf. Nicephorus glowed with pride, as he passed from one orderly camp to another, and noticed how completely the rage of battle and the hurricane of licence had given way to a scene of peaceful business as regular as could be seen in the bazaars of the capital itself. The military police patrolled every corner of the encampment; and strong bodies of civilian merchants, salesmen, experts, and traders, such as usually followed a great Roman army, were busy appraising the booty, or putting it up for sale

and exchange. The immense stores of coin, nearly all of them golden bezants from the Roman mints, which had been discovered in the vaults of the Arab Government, were now being registered and placed in safe keeping for the use of the royal exchequer by skilled fiscal officers of State. The gold and silver plate, the jewelled ornaments, and many of the rarest embroideries, carpets, and tapestries—for the most part plundered in piratical descents on seaboard cities of the Empire—these were reserved to be borne in procession when the triumph in the Hippodrome was to be celebrated. And with these were set apart for the same show, specimens of arms and armour, jewelled turbans with aigrettes and plumes set on steel helmets, chain coats of mail, fringed pennons, kettledrums, and brass trumpets, Bedaween chargers of rare beauty, snowy-white, with sweeping tails and heads as delicate as those of a gazelle. Camels, and white asses of rare Arabian breed, and Nubian slaves, gigantic in body, and grotesque in countenance, their ebon limbs circled with massive rings and loosely clad in white tunics, formed many a fantastic and motley group.

Abd-el-Aziz, the aged Commander, or Kouropas, as the Romans called him, along with his son, the gallant Anemas, were set apart and placed in tents beside head-quarters, under the immediate supervision of Nicephorus. They, too, were to be borne in the triumphal procession and offered to the Autocrat to await his good pleasure. And with the venerable chief and his son were reserved for the same occasion the most distinguished men and most beautiful youths and maidens of his family and household, all of whom the General had strictly ordered were to be treated with the utmost respect and generosity, and provided with everything proper to their rank.

The ordinary survivors of the Saracen city and the immense booty of all kinds which, in spite of the destruction, the fires, and ruin of the three days of storm, had been collected by the officers charged with the duty, were now being sold by auction. Garments, ornaments, utensils, fabrics of every kind and of every factory, both of the East and the West, were strewn about and held up for inspection in picturesque confusion. A few of the wealthier officers gathered round the platforms of the auctioneers to pick up any article which took their fancy ; some of the soldiers here and there thought they could recognise an ornament plundered from a home they had once known ; but, for the most part, the buyers were professional traders, who, like

vultures after a bloody field, had swooped down on the spot from far and near—Jews from Syria and Egypt, Armenian brokers from the Golden Horn, renegade Moslems from Damascus and Acre, exiled Latins from Amalphi and Palermo, Hellenes from Corinth, Italians from Venice and Bari, and Slavs from Adrianople and Dyrrachium.

It was not at all a mere auction of stuffs, ornaments, and household goods. The really useful beasts, whether camels, horses, or asses, had been already requisitioned for the army by the Imperial officials. The refuse of the cattle, which was not worth the transport, was offered to the highest bidder, and now could command but trifling prices. But the bulk of the ordinary sales were those of living prisoners of war. By the laws of war, as accepted in that age between Christians and Moslems, the entire population of a city taken by storm was destined to slavery. Certainly, slavery had been the recognised lot of the Christian population that was not put to death on capture of a city by the Saracens. An immense proportion of the males able to bear arms in Chandax had been slaughtered in battle, and in the murderous scenes of the three days' storm. It was too true, also, that no small part of the aged and infirm, the children and infants of both sexes had shared the same fate. There still remained thousands upon thousands of women and girls who were worth buying, and a certain number of youths who could command a price. The Arab historians, with exaggeration characteristic of the age, calmly record that 200,000 males were slaughtered, and as many women and youths sold as slaves. But it cannot be denied that, law and religion to the contrary, day by day, and week after week, the sales of women, girls, and youths were continued; and that of these all who had beauty, strength, and aptitude of any kind for work, charm, or art, were eagerly contended for by the professional merchants in human flesh.

One of the strange incidents of the sales, and the source of constant disturbance, arose from the claim of many of the prisoners, both girls and youths, that they were Christians and Romans who had been abducted in childhood and sold as slaves. Many of these had, more or less, lost the use of their Greek tongue, and in dress, manners, and ideas were practically naturalised Saracens. The plea was continually resisted by the merchants, and was, no doubt, very often used in fraud. But the vehemence of the protests, and the eagerness of the captives

to prove their Christian faith and their Roman birth gave rise to perpetual disputes. One of them was in full cry as the General and his staff, with Digenes by his side, rode round the principal slave mart in the camp. Seeing the General approach, a beautiful girl, already set on the stage to be inspected by the buyers, with loud shrieks invoked the protection of the Chief. She herself, her younger sister, and a brother—all three included in the next lots—had been carried off from the island of Melos, when it was raided by a Saracen fleet fourteen years ago in the reign of Constantine. The girl had so far lost her Greek speech that it was difficult to follow her at all; and her brother and sister had lost it altogether. Nicephorus turned to Digenes to question the maiden in Arabic, and to ascertain if she were really of Roman birth and Christian faith—a task which the Lord Warden, with his own mixed blood and training, was peculiarly fitted to fulfil. "What is your name, my daughter, your home, and your age?" asked the Lord Warden in a tone of paternal encouragement.

"I am Zoe, as my mother called me as a child—but they call me here Zainab. I was seven years old, I think, when these cruel men carried me off in a big ship, but I can remember my home by the sea-coast."

"Was it in the country or in a city, my daughter, that you dwelt?"

"In a city called Melos, that looked out towards the rising sun," she said.

"And what could you see from your home?"

"Oh! I well remember how we would climb a hill behind our town and see the sun rise over the pinnacles of many islands that seemed to cover the sea like stars at night in the sky."

"Was the island flat or full of hills and rocks?"

"Oh! I remember how we used to climb the rocks where goats fed and where vines grew, and there was a large fountain of hot water in which we used to bathe, and the marble steps in a circle which they said the old Greeks built for shows, and caves in the rocks where we would play at hide-and-seek! Yes, on clear days in the setting sun we could see the far-off mountains. We were a day and a night in that dreadful ship, lying in the hold without air or water, before those savage men, who killed father and mother, brought us here."

"Enough!" said the Lord Warden, and he turned to the General. "The girl clearly remembers Melos as her home; it is

the westernmost of the Cyclades, whence all these islands can be seen and the mainland of Greece in the far West; it has volcanic rocks and hot springs, for I have touched on the island myself. No Saracen girl could know all this. She and her little sister and brother must be all Christian captives, for all her Saracen look and speech."

And so, amidst the cries of joy of the rescued captives, the grumbling and disputes of the captors, merchants, and auctioneers, and the noisy gossip of the curious crowd, the General's cavalcade passed on. And at every mart similar questions as to living or inert property, angry altercations between soldiers and civilians were brought before the summary tribunal of the staff.

As they rode slowly back from the hubbub of the camp, Nicephorus called Digenes to his side, out of hearing of his followers. "I have now matured the scheme," he said, "on which I intend to dispatch you on a mission, my dear Warden, as the man most fit to bring it to success. As I told you, his Imperial Majesty has given me full powers to send an embassy to the Caliph of Spain to arrange a *modus vivendi*, as our civil lawyers call it, in our respective conquests as to our prisoners of war. Saracens have conquered and hold effective possession of the noble island of Sicily, as we have now conquered and hold possession of Crete. In both islands large masses of the peasants and working people belong to the race and creed of the former masters, and in both islands there are tens of thousands of men and women in slavery who have been struck down from freedom and comfort by the fortune of war. The Caliph of Cordova also holds tens of thousands of our brethren. I have had a scheme prepared by learned and adroit protocolists from Constantinople to arrange terms of reciprocal treatment on an equal footing. And we shall begin by an exchange of important prisoners. I have chosen you, my dear Akritas, to head the embassy, for you are not yet strong enough to undertake any warlike service."

"My honoured Lord," cried Digenes in surprise, "if I am not fit to hold a sword, I am the last man in the army to be entrusted with protocols and Imperial rescripts in vermilion text. Put the charge on one of the Imperial eunuchs from the Purple Chamber."

"My dear Warden, I have cared for all that! The treaty and its clauses and provisoes will be the task of the civilian

diplomats who will be in your train. Your name, your birth, your knowledge of the Saracen tongue and manners make you indispensable for this service. The flower of our Roman chivalry will be *grata persona* in the brilliant Court of Abderrahman, the Caliph at Cordova, and will make the task of the diplomats more easy."

"And has the Lord General, 'the Victorious,' at last begun to see some good things as possible in the blood of Hagar?" asked Digenes, with an arch smile.

"I have never denied, my son, the courage or the devotion of the true children of the False Prophet, even when I saw this courage and devotion to be inspired by the author of all evil himself. They and we must fight it out to the bitter end. But in this secular warfare there are truces, settlements, and agreements inevitable and serving the good purposes of God and the Mother of God, such as help to the saving of many a soul. Our royal master himself has sent embassies and made treaties with the great Caliph, and I am obeying his orders and following his example."

"But what particular part am I to bear in the mission?" said Digenes.

"You are to show these proud Emirs of the East that they have nothing to teach us Romans in all the courtesies of chivalry, or the romance of knightly life. And there is another duty for which my courtly son is specially fitted. Our mission will include, beside the customary presents and offerings of horses, jewels, and robes, a select band from the noblest of the Saracen families, both men and women, who are to be restored to their Saracen kinsfolk in token of our honour and good faith. Who so fit for a charge so delicate as the hero of the Eastern Marches? The chief of these will be Fatima, the orphan daughter of the giant Emir, who fell by my hand in single combat. She is to return to her people with a sister and a child brother, with other kinsfolk of her own, and her women attendants and slaves."

"Choose some other as her guardian, my Lord General," said Digenes rather shortly.

"Saint George! what is this?" said the General, with a grim smile. "Are you not old friends? Little as I know of young hearts myself, I know that she saved your life; and you saved hers. It is thought you were lovers: you have been so much together ever since the storming of the city. But, in any case,

there is no man on my staff to whom I can so confidently entrust these noble women on an honourable mission as my gallant Digenes Akritas. I have summoned them to my head-quarters to hear my purpose. It is a thing fixed," said Nicephorus, in a tone that no man in all that host had ever ventured to dispute.

"Lovers!" muttered the Lord Warden; "could I love any but a true Christian, or any but——" and his lips moved silently.

When they returned to head-quarters the noble ladies were at once introduced and presented to the General—Fatima, her sister and her cousins, the daughters of the Saracen Emirs, with their slaves and attendants.

"Ladies," said Nicephorus through an interpreter, "it is the will of our Sovereign Lord, Romanus, to send an embassy to treat of terms with the illustrious Caliph Abderrahman at Cordova in Spain. With that embassy we send you: to be returned to your own people in honour, as a pledge of our good faith, and in proof that the servants of the Immaculate Virgin Mother make no war upon her sex, and respect the women of those whom they have conquered and slain."

At these words Fatima stood forward and spoke. She was dressed in robes of deep mourning, and lightly veiled. Her whole bearing was one of profound dejection and self-abandonment, and her voice thrilled the circle of fierce soldiers by its tones of poignant misery.

"The will of God be done," she sighed, "be it as my Lord the General orders. We are his captives: we listen and submit."

"What would you wish other, my daughter?" said Nicephorus, in some surprise that Fatima should show so little joy at her return to a Saracen court. "Where could you be so well bestowed?—not here in Crete, nor in the Empire of his Majesty?"

"I am content—and thank my lord," she said—and sighed.

"The mission," said the General, "will be under the command of the Lord Warden of the Marches, for whose safety the Roman army owes you thanks, my daughter; and that noble officer, who can speak your own tongue and has kinsmen in your own race, has personal charge of the safe-conduct of yourself and your ladies."

At this announcement the whole bearing of Fatima seemed to

change. Her veil hardly concealed her blushes or the joy that lit up her eyes.

"The Lord Warden," she said, in a voice broken with emotion, "nursed my own brother on his deathbed with tenderness and generosity. And the sister could be in no better care than in his;" and she raised her veil, and with a look of rapture that was more than gratitude, Fatima beamed her thanks to the Lord General, to whom she bowed in reverence, with lowered eyes and quickened breath.

"Withdraw with these ladies, my Lord Warden, and explain to them freely in their own language what is the Imperial purpose, and how completely their comfort and their dignity will be considered in the mission of which you have command."

Digenes, who foresaw all the difficulties and risks of the situation, knew the General too well to dream of changing any set purpose he had formed. His chivalry was deeply touched at being appointed guardian of the woman to whom he owed his life, whilst his loyalty to the Imperial Princess at home made him shrink from the society of the beautiful Saracen with whom his lot seemed so strangely thrown. He resolved to execute the commission with which he was entrusted with all possible brevity and reserve.

"Surely," said he, in the tones of a judge rather than of a lover, "surely, fair Lady Fatima, it can give to you and your kinswomen and followers nothing but happiness to be restored to your own people, of the Arab blood and the faith of the Prophet; and it is my charge to see that everything shall be done to bring you to them in safety and in honour."

"The purpose of the Lord General is most kind, and I know that these ladies with me are full of gratitude and pleasure. But for me—I have lost father, mother, brother, and have none to care for, or to care for me. Cordova is not Chandax; nor is this Caliph of Spain the real Commander of the Faithful, or the true successor of the Prophet. Where to find that true successor I know not. Nor does any man know. Islam seems passing away in rival sects and hostile parties. I have heard the Christian women who have been in captivity with us solace their afflictions and sufferings by calling on Mary, whom you hold to sit beside your Allah in heaven. We Moslem women have no Mary to invoke. Our Allah is the God of men—of soldiers—He is no God to us poor maidens, who sorrow and despair."

"What!" said Digenes, in astonishment which he could not control, "do you mean that you might learn in time to call on the Blessed Mary yourself and take comfort in the example of all the holy women who have devoted themselves to the Mother of God?"

"Did the Emir of Edessa forfeit his honour when he bowed the knee to the Crucified Redeemer?"

"God forbid, lady! my father was a noble chief and a true man; and if he forsook the Prophet for the Immaculate One, it was a conversion inspired with love of the best and purest maiden in the Roman Empire, as all men called my sainted mother!"

"So it is the privilege of men to forsake the faith of their fathers for the love of a woman. Such an one is not called a renegade, if his conversion is the result of—of love!"

"Lady Fatima," said the Lord Warden with pride and almost with a trace of warmth, "the followers of the Prophet did justice to my father's honour as fully as did the followers of Christ, into whose ranks he passed, and amongst whom he lived and died. The dwellers of the Cilician Marches, where Christian and Moslem meet in perpetual combat, have learned to value each other, and to know that the true believers in Koran or Gospel have each much to be proud of; and each have much to envy in the other. Your brother, whom I nursed on his deathbed, and I had but one heart and one mind in many things. We might have been sons of the same parents, instead of being as we were sons of a brother and a sister. Soldiers who have lived their lives in doing battle for their own faith are of one creed and one race in Asia as in Europe, in Syria as in Thrace."

"And we poor women have no such privilege? It is not permitted to women to change their faith out of gratitude, or sympathy—or love?" she said with a melting tone, as her eyes grew dim and her voice died away in sighs.

"The women of Islam," he answered with deference, "do not go forth into the great world, we are assured, but live a life of retirement in their homes and their hareem. They accept the faith and the worship of their fathers, their brothers, or their husbands. They do not busy themselves with mysteries of religion, or the sacred books of saints and martyrs. They may change their creed when they change their home—but they do not listen to controversies about sacred things and holy persons."

"And Christian women do this, you mean to tell me, and busy

themselves with the things of heaven and the care of their souls?"

"It is natural that it should be so, my dear lady, when you come to think that next to God the Almighty and His Son, the Redeemer of Mankind, the first and holiest of beings is the Immaculate Virgin, Mother of God, who ever sits enthroned in glory with holy martyr women and saints around her. In Christendom, in our churches, in our worship, in our sacred books, there is quite as great a part for women as for men—nay, a part greater and more beautiful." And the Akritas now spoke with something of the fervour of a priest pressing conversion on a willing penitent.

"Ah! how could a poor captive girl of the Saracens come to hear something of this blessed company of holy women? How could she learn something of a truly religious life as open to an ignorant maiden who had heard of little but the Prophet and his warriors? How could she be brought to feel some touches of the trust and passion with which Christian maidens I have seen in sorrow fling themselves on the mercy of the Blessed Mary in heaven? Mary—Mother of God!—it is a name of exquisite beauty and tenderness! Could even I be taught ever to utter it?"

"Nothing more easy, more natural, more truly blessed," said Digenes eagerly, quite carried away with the sudden hope that the Princess seriously contemplated her possible conversion; and at the time, in the warmth of his hopes for such a result, quite unable to read the girl's heart. "I could at once enable you to make the attempt. Follow us with your sister and ladies to the capital. There you can be placed in charge of my own sister, the Lady Theodosia Comnena, who is now living at her husband's castle in the Propontis. Nothing easier than that I should introduce you to her family, and place you in her charge. We are cousins, are we not, even if of different creeds?"

"Yes—we are cousins," she said slowly, lingering on that word with a sense of rapture and hope that she struggled to master and conceal. "If we are cousins, your sister, the Lady Theodosia, is my cousin too!"

"Certainly! how came I not to see all this at first? And you would be willing to renounce the Caliph at Cordova, and forget the return to your Saracen kindred and your Moslem life?"

"Utterly, joyfully, for ever! To be taken to your sister, to my own cousin, to be taken into their family! Oh yes! if

heaven were offered me as an alternative I would accept it with joy! Let those who will go to Cordova. I would see Rome, the Roman world, and Roman life!"

"Ah! if you could only see our city, our churches, our altars, and the sublime mosaics of Christ, His Mother, archangels and apostles, and our mothers and sisters before the *ikons* and holy figures of Mary, you would know what it is to be a Christian believer," said Digenes, quite carried away by the thought of a new and so illustrious a convert.

"And are you sure that the Lady Theodosia and her family would welcome me?" asked the Saracen Princess somewhat archly, as if in real doubt.

"She would rejoice to have you in her care, and would treat you as her own sister, just as she has now in her safe charge the Princess Agatha, who has escaped from a convent prison and is securely placed with my sister."

"And who then is the Princess Agatha?" asked Fatima abruptly.

"Who?" said Digenes impetuously—"who but the sister of our Sovereign Lord, Romanus, whom cruel counsellors caused him to drive from his Palace, and more cruel priests consigned to a living death in a nunnery of women."

"And what is she like?"

"She is like the Blessed Mary herself in beauty, in purity, in mercy, and every grace; the sweetest, best, and noblest woman in the Empire of Rome—whom the jealousy of Palace counsellors seeks to snatch from wedlock and motherhood, and to consign to the solitary cell of a nun; whom these hypocrites and bigots dare to call a bride of Christ. Never shall these fanatics endow their convents with the noblest bride that Rome has ever born;" and the Lord Warden's look of heroic passion flamed in his eyes and brought the blood into his olive cheek. "Never, never, if I live!" he cried, hardly thinking to whom he spoke in his indignation and excitement.

"And whose bride is she destined to be, this peerless, this incomparable star of Rome? Is she the promised bride of any of your Roman heroes?" asked Fatima, looking keenly into the eyes of Digenes, and eagerly awaiting his answer, as of a message of life or death.

The Lord Warden answered not a word. He tried to speak. He began some broken words. His embarrassment could not be concealed. He now saw all the false attitude into which his

own want of discernment, his impetuosity, his love had betrayed him. He had nothing to answer. He was dumb with confusion and humiliation.

Fatima watched him closely and in silence, and seemed to read his heart. Her attitude of eagerness and of trust and hope passed away. She fell back into her previous condition of abasement and silent despair. The light passed from her eyes, and her voice resumed its tone of piteous sorrow and hopeless humility.

"Cousin," she said at last in broken and low tones, "I am deeply grateful. The sister of your Sovereign Lord is too great a person to look on the poor captive whose people he has conquered, whose father his Commander has slain. She shall not look down on her in pity. Rome and its Court is no place for the daughter of Ben-Senoussi: Fatima will abide with her own people. Leave her in Crete or conduct her to Spain. She will ask no charity of Christian maidens. Farewell, kind helper of my brother, the preserver of Fatima's life and honour. Forget her for ever. Let us never meet again! Remember only that she will never forget you!"

And so, drawing close round her the mourning robes, and the long veil over her face, with slow and weary steps, without another word, Fatima passed over to her own tent.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CALIPH OF THE WEST

The great embassy to the Spanish Caliph arrived at Cordova under command of Digenes Akritas, and was received with all the pomp and dignity that the mighty Sovereign of the Peninsula could display in his Andalusian capital. It was the policy both of the Roman and of the Arab statesmen to seek to impress their rivals with a full sense of their own high civilisation, vast resources, and generous spirit. The deadly feuds that raged between the Ommeyad Caliphs of Spain and the Abbassid Caliphs of Bagdad, and also with the Fatimite dynasty of Mauritania, inclined the politic Abderrahman, who, the first of his house, had assumed the sacred and historic title of "Commander of the Faithful," to cultivate a good understanding with the Roman Emperor at Byzantium. Whilst Rome was carrying on the internecine warfare with the Moslems of Asia, against the redoubtable Seîf Eddauleh, the hero of the Hamdanide dynasty, the Basileus was a useful counterpoise in the divided world of Islam, on the principle that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The high intelligence of the great Caliph, and the prosperity of his kingdom, based upon a vast Mediterranean commerce, had made any fanatical hostility to Christians an obsolete and discredited infatuation which the sagacious Sultan of Spain repudiated.

The mission which Nicephorus had dispatched under orders from the Sacred Palace, but which he neither advised nor approved, was organised on a great scale. Many officers of rank and civil officials were included, and amongst them Bardas Skleros, Commander of the Armenian guards, his young friend, the Varangian Eric, the poetic Deacon, always in search of epic "motives," and some of the financiers and diplomatists who were attached to every great Imperial expedition. The Princess Fatima, dejected and indifferent for herself, had been induced to join the party for the sake of her young sister and brother and

the ladies of her race, whose obvious interest it was to return to a Moslem Court.

At Malaka, the seaport at which the embassy disembarked, it was met by a splendid array of Emirs, Chamberlains, and officers deputed by the Caliph to conduct the Romans to the capital. Even to men accustomed to the shipping of all kinds that filled the Golden Horn and traversed the Hellespont, the fleet, docks, and warehouses of the Arab realm were an impressive sight. The Vizier Ahmed conducted the Lord Warden and his staff by leisurely stages to Cordova. And he did not fail to draw attention to the dense population along the rich valley of the Guadalquivir (or as they called it al-Wâd ul-Kabir), the profusion of its products, and the active state of agriculture and of manufactures. On the morning of the third day, the cavalcade were able, from an eminence, to descry the towers of Cordova itself, as it lay washed by the noble river and surrounded by the spurs of the Sierra Morena mountains. The Vizier watched in dignified silence the astonishment of the envoys, which they did not seek to conceal.

The royal city of the Ommeyad Caliph appeared, indeed, vast and magnificent even to the inhabitants of Byzantium itself. Far as the eye could reach in that clear and sunny air, the towers, palaces, and mosques of the capital continued in endless variety and picturesque confusion.

"What may be the extent of your city?" asked Digenes of the Vizier.

"One of our historians has calculated that it reaches twenty-four miles one way and six on the other, and beyond the city walls are the suburbs in twenty-seven quarters: each quarter having its mosques, markets, and baths for the use of those who live in the district."

And here the poetic Deacon, ever keen to get accurate information, begged to be told the number of the inhabitants.

"I would rather not charge my own memory," said the Vizier indifferently, "but my librarian here, Ibn Khaldûn, can, doubtless, give you the figures you seek."

"The inhabitants of the capital," said Ibn Khaldûn, "are reckoned now to exceed a thousand thousand. There are 3,800 mosques, 60,000 palaces and mansions, 200,000 houses of the common people. And for their convenience the city and its suburbs contain 700 baths and 80,000 shops, together

with markets, hostelries and caravanserais for merchants and their trains."

The poet, who was already resolved on a description of their visit in verse, transferred all this to his notebook, when he had been assured by the librarian that it was not the exaggeration of Oriental eulogy, but the sober calculation of economic and historical writers.

At last the entire embassy reached the city, where they were received with interest and curiosity in the crowded streets. The Lady Fatima, her kinswomen, attendants, and slaves, had been consigned to the personal charge of the young Varangian, with a fitting retinue of male and female servitors. Eric, who had received strict instructions to see that the Cretan captives of all ranks were cared for with every possible honour, gazed upon the Lady Fatima with mute adoration; for he was unable to communicate with her in a single word. If he had any instructions to give, they were interpreted to her by one of her attendants who spoke the tongue of Rome, of which Eric himself had but a smattering. The contrast between these two young creatures—the finest types of Northern and Southern beauty, of Scandinavian strength and of Arab fire—struck every eye that fell on them, as they met and exchanged a dignified salute. The Cordovan monarch, like the Byzantine, had long maintained a bodyguard of Northern warriors, mainly Scandinavians, Alemans, or Slavonians, sold as slaves in youth, like the famous Janissaries of modern Turkey. The Spanish Saracens were familiar with the bone and sinew of these fair-haired Norsemen and mountaineers; but they rarely met one of such perfect symmetry and brilliant colour as distinguished the young Viking in his superb mail of gold. Nor could all the houris of Andalusia match the Lady Fatima in high-bred grace and the pensive and searching power of her eyes.

On the appointed day the ambassador and his following were escorted in state to the Caliph's hall of audience. For Digenes himself, and for some of the higher officers—such as Bardas Skleros of the Armenian Guard, men who had seen the most renowned cities, both of the Saracen and of the Roman Empires—the magnificence and beauty of the Palace of Cordova was not so surprising. But the secretaries, diplomatists, and, above all, the poetic Deacon, could not restrain their sense of awe and admiration. The patriotic heart of the

poet almost misgave him as he asked himself if the city on the Golden Horn, "guarded of God," and the Sacred Palace of the Basileus itself really outshone the city and residence of Abderrahman III. He even put the question in private to Michael, the protocolist, by his side, one of the acutest intellects in the Byzantine chancery.

"Yes! the courts of the Caliph have almost as much gold as that of our Cæsar, and their fantastic richness of decoration may astonish the vulgar. But it is the profusion and intricacy of embroidery and lace. There is nothing here of the majesty of the massive colonnades of Hagia Sophia, nor of the Golden Gate on our outer walls."

"But what miracles of colour and of filigree design do we not see in those painted slabs and carved ceilings," said the poet; "it is like a grove of roses and myrtles in stone and enamel."

"Too much like the silken robes of our Parakeimomenos, which cover a huge but emasculated frame," said Michael.

The poet laughed uneasily, and looked round instinctively, for even in Spain he felt the risk of a jest at the expense of Bringas.

"And then you will not find here those sublime images of our Saints and of Christ and His Mother, such as give so solemn a power to our Christian temples. These Saracen figures, where any living thing is shown, are conventional grotesques. There is neither statuary nor painting of any kind—least of all of women and of the Mother of God. These Hagarenes are worse than our rabid iconoclasts themselves."

The embassy passed on through a series of courts, surrounded by shady cloisters and rich with flowers and blossoming shrubs, along corridors and halls, lined with troopers in coat of mail and with chamberlains and ushers in embroidered robes, till at last they reached the great hall, where the mighty Caliph sat in audience. The salutes and obeisances on both sides were duly performed with all the stately ceremony of Constantinople itself, and with even more grace and reserve of manner. And those who have seen a State Durbar in India may attain to some idea of the spectacle it afforded.

The great Caliph, the Charlemagne of Saracen Spain, was now at the close of his long rule of half a century. He was seventy-three years of age, and a life of incessant toil and of continual warfare had caused him to look at least ten years

older than his actual years. The reception of Digenes was almost the last act of his public life; but, in spite of his infirmities, he insisted on taking his place, and doing honour to the Lord Warden, of whose family history and personal prowess he was perfectly aware.

Abderrahman III. still looked what he was, the greatest ruler of his age and the noblest type of the Saracen race. In fifty years he had reduced the rebels and traitors within his own dominion, had made vassals of the Christian princelets of North Spain, and had driven back the Mauritanian invaders from Africa. He possessed a magnificent fleet, a powerful army, and a treasury of 20,000,000 of gold pieces The police of his realm secured perfect order and peace ; the state of agriculture was in the highest degree thriving ; commerce and manufactures were equally advanced. Supported by his son and successor, Hakim, and his able minister, Ghâlib, the aged monarch received the Lord Warden right royally, and motioned him to a throne beside himself on the daïs.

Then the credentials issued by Nicephorus were read by the chief of the protocol service.

"Illustrious and Renowned Sovereign : Commander of those Faithful to the Prophet, I am ordered by our Imperial Majesty, Romanus, to send to your Capital city a mission of the chief officers and administrators from the army of Crete, to treat of urgent affairs between our respective realms. I have placed at the head of this embassy the chivalrous Lord Warden of the Eastern Marches, Basil Digenes, the Akritas, in whose veins are mingled the blood of Saracen Emirs and of Armenian Princes. He and the noble and learned envoys in this mission will fully explain the objects in view, which are to secure amity and reciprocal concessions between Your Majesty and our own Sovereign Lord. We send to the Court of Your Majesty many eminent persons of both sexes, whom the issues of war, which God above us decrees, have placed in our hands. And we seek an exchange of an equal number of those followers of Christ who are now detained in your realm. Finally, we propose an agreement between our two Councils for the better disposal of those Moslems who remain under our rule in Crete, and also of those Christians who abide under your rule in Spain. The issues of the great struggle between the followers of Christ and of the Prophet are in the hands of God, whom we all alike worship and obey. We are His servants and His creatures : and we can do nothing of ourselves save what He permits. In this we can unite in one purpose. And it is our fervent hope that He who has given Your Majesty power and authority so great may guide your counsels to meet in a spirit of amity the proposals we are ordered by our Sovereign Lord, the Basileus, to submit to your wisdom. And may God the Merciful, the Just, bring this mission to a right end."

The aged and now infirm Caliph bowed his head solemnly, and his white beard flowed over his royal robes ; but his eyes showed some of their ancient fire as with a trembling voice he said—

"No envoy from the Basileus of Roum could be more welcome to our Court than yourself, Lord Warden of the Marches, whose very name reminds us all of the blending of the races of Christ and of Islam, and whose deeds of valour and chivalry of soul are sung by the poets of Europe and of Asia. It was most fitting that an agreement between our two powers should be entrusted to one who embodies in his own person and in his career of service the qualities which both people so deeply respect. The illustrious Lord General of your Basileus is as well known to Islam as to Rome itself. We cannot wonder and complain if his people name him 'The Victorious,' for the most redoubted soldiers of the Prophet have too often felt the weight of his sword. Islam has never met any adversary whom it has reason to hold in such respect. We well know the fiery zeal which burns within his soul: and we can see in the dispatch that has been read how little to his taste is the proposal of amity that he has been ordered to submit. But this shall not prevent our willingness to treat and to agree to equitable terms. As Commander of the Faithful, we have our own duties of peaceful government as well as the defence of our realm in war. Our Court has statesmen as well as warriors. Peace hath its victories as well as war. The proposals of your Basileus, with whom we have as yet many bonds of good understanding, shall be referred to our counsellors and not to our soldiers. Nicephorus, 'The Victorious,' has subdued in Crete a tribe who were but rebels to our dynasty, outcasts and fugitives from our rule in Spain. Now that he speaks words of peace, however little they seem natural to his soldier's mouth, they shall be considered and answered by our men of peace. When the time comes he may find in the sons of Arabia and followers of the Prophet a zeal as fiery as that with which he himself is consumed. When that day shall dawn, tell your illustrious General that it is the daily prayer of the Commander of the Faithful that God, the Just, the Almighty, may give the crown of glory to the right."

The aged Caliph was visibly affected by the effort he had made to receive the mission; he sank back on his divan exhausted; and was only prevented from fainting by the care of his son, Hakim, and the staff around him. The Durbar was hastily closed and the officers of the mission withdrew with appropriate salaams and compliments. They were now placed in the hands of the Vizier's secretaries and the librarian, Ibn

Khaldûn, who were directed to escort them to view the chief sights of the capital. After exploring all the courts and halls of the Caliph's Palace they were taken to the famous mosque, which still remains in part the singular cathedral of Cordova. The vast and stately Court of Oranges had recently been completed, and was adorned with a thousand orange trees in bloom, at which the Byzantines gazed in delight and wonder. This splendid fruit was not yet acclimatised in Europe, and had been introduced but recently into Andalusia from Syria by the care of Abderrahman himself. Mixed with roses from Damascus, the groves of oranges in the quadrangular court, shaded with a rich cloister, seemed to the Romans a vision of Paradise. Close by rose the exquisite Campanile, which resembled the lower part of that which we know as the Giralda at Seville, though it was in a style of art more solid and severe. And the centre of the Court of Oranges was occupied with the beautiful fountain of African marbles, porcelain, and enamel, which the Caliph had only finished within a few years.

But all the surprise of the Romans was doubled as they entered the great mosque itself, which was still being further enlarged and adorned. They found themselves in a forest of marble columns bearing arches in fantastic forms with exquisite patterns traced in relief and bright with enamel and gold. Again the Deacon had recourse to his notebook, and was anxious to learn their number and origin. "There are said to be twelve hundred columns arranged in eleven aisles; and they have been collected from temples and palaces of the ancients in Spain and Africa, or they have been carved by our artificers from antique models," said the librarian. "But his Highness the Lord Hakim is even now enlarging the aisles and carrying them on to double their extent."

Thence the visitors were led into the chapel, adorned with mosaics obtained from Byzantium direct through the easy munificence of Romanus himself. In the *Ceca* they were shown the pavement of pure silver and the exquisite marbles and alabaster with which the shrine was adorned. By special grace of Prince Hakim they were even permitted to look on the sacred copy of the Alcoran which had been used by the Caliph Osman, the successor of the Prophet, and stained with his blood when he fell. From the roof hung two hundred chandeliers, containing 10,000 lamps. And as they passed out into the courtyard from this forest of marble and gold, a vehement

debate arose between Michael, the protocolist, and the poetic Deacon, whether the solemn vaults of the Holy Wisdom of Justinian could hold their own against the myriad shafts and arabesques of the mosque of the Caliph Abderrahman.

The younger members of the mission were then conducted through a country crowded with villas, gardens, and orchards, for an hour's ride to the vast palace of Az-zahra, or "The Beautiful," built by the great Caliph for his favourite wife. It was constructed entirely of marble of various hues, white, onyx, rose-coloured, and green. The courts and fountains were adorned with gold and enamels ; and gardens and shady cloisters stretched around. In the palace were 4,300 columns of marble. Into the great hall of the Caliphate were eight lofty doors overlaid with plates of gold and studded with precious stones. And the walls were adorned with carved traceries in alternate squares of ebony and ivory. The separate apartments numbered more than a thousand ; and the service of the palace was conducted by 13,000 male and 6,000 female domestics, whilst the guard and watch was kept by Slavonians and Northern Janissaries, who were said to number no less than 3,750 in all.

In the meantime the Deacon, Michael, the protocolist, and other secretaries were conducted by the librarian, Ibn Khaldûn, to the great library of the Caliph, which at that time was reckoned as the largest and most important collection in the civilised world, and was said to contain 400,000 manuscripts. All the works which had been collected by Haroun Al Raschid and the Caliphs of Bagdad, by the Ommeyades of Damascus, as well as by the dynasty of Spain, were here gathered together. Lexicons, biographies, grammars, histories, geographies, rhetoric, works on chemistry, geometry, medicine, astronomy, and poetry—all were in turn exhibited and discussed.

But what impressed the diplomatists most strikingly was the great library of Greek works from Aristotle and Plato downwards—Theophrastus, Galen, Hippocrates, and Apollonius, and complete collections of the astronomical and mathematical works of Archimedes, Hipparchus, Eudoxus, Diophantus, and Ptolemy. These Greek philosophers and physicists were far more highly valued and better understood by the *savants* of Islam than by the Christians of the Empire. The Deacon and the diplomatists were not so much astonished to see in the bookcases of Cordova the entire works of Aristotle, Theophrastus,

Hipparchus, Galen, and Heron, as a modern scholar would be, for these writers were still to be found for the most part in the libraries of the Empire. But they saw with pride and no small surprise that the entire extant writings of the philosophers and physicists of Greece were the ordinary equipment of a Saracen library.

The members of the mission were occupied for days in surveying the capital of the great Caliph—its resources, architectural, mechanical, commercial, artistic, and literary. They were shown over the great aqueduct which Abderrahman III. had recently erected to convey to the city pure spring water from the mountains of the Sierra Morena. His predecessors had already supplied Cordova with abundant aqueducts, fountains, and baths, so that it almost vied with ancient Rome in the age of the Antonines, and was quite as well supplied as Byzantium in the age of Romanus. The new aqueduct had only been completed twenty years before. It rose on three tiers of arches, similar to those of the Aqua Claudia, which spans the Campagna at Rome ; and it discharged a constant river of pure water into a vast central reservoir, which supplied public fountains and private palaces. Every mansion of any importance had its garden, fountain, and flowing rivulet. The hydraulic system was, indeed, more complete than what Rome had known in the age of the Cæsars, for the Arabs of Spain were the first engineers of that age. The poet and the young guardsman were particularly delighted with the gardens of Rusâfa, which had been stocked with rare plants and flowers from all parts of the world, especially from the gardens of Syria, Persia, India, and Egypt. The orange, the lemon, citron, the almond, and the palm, laurel, and myrtle were cultivated in sheltered spots, and were a never-failing delight to the Northern visitors. But that which most fascinated the Byzantines were the wild animals confined in houses connected with the gardens, especially the various kinds of gazelles of the East, the golden pheasants, the ostrich, the white ibis, the cheetahs, and the lions. The young Varangian was quite excited out of his natural placidity by a hunt of deer by the cheetah, as now used in India ; whilst the poet was equally excited by a kind of race between antelopes which were allowed a free run in an enclosed course.

In the midst of the festivities and the hospitalities a sudden event plunged the whole city in gloom. The aged Caliph,

exhausted by the effort he had made to receive with dignity the envoys of Nicephorus, had been seized with a succession of fainting fits, in the course of which he had died. His death had been concealed even from the foreign mission, until the succession of his son, Hakim II., had been duly secured. And this was carried out with great energy and dispatch by the grand Vizier Ahmed, and the Commander-in-Chief, the Emir Ghâlib. In due time the new Caliph, having been recognised by the heads of the army, the mosques, and the administration, received in audience Digenes and his officers and suite. After official compliments and addresses, Hakim admitted Digenes to a private audience. With all the zeal of his father for good government, peace, prosperity, and order, the new Commander of the Faithful had an even greater devotion to art, science, and literature, and was conscious that he had harder tasks and inferior powers. In reply to the felicitations of the Lord Warden on the glory of the late Caliph's rule, and on the noble Empire to which he had now succeeded, Hakim replied with a sigh—

"Yes! my royal father ruled over this realm for fifty years; and those who look at the power, wealth, renown, and splendour of his Caliphate may be disposed to call him one of the happiest of men with a double measure of the goodness of Allah. But I, who have lived in his home and for long years shared his duties, knew too well that he was the most sombre, if not one of the most miserable of men. His favourite wife, for whom the Palace of Az-zahra was built and after whom it was named, died before it was completed. And since the death of my elder brother, our father was never seen to smile."

"But was not your brother killed in the hour of victory?" said Digenes.

"Not my eldest brother, Abdallah. He had been so infatuated as to put himself at the head of a revolt, and suffered himself by rebels to be proclaimed as Caliph. When defeated and captured, our father in solemn council decided that he must die the death of a traitor to Islam. Our sacred faith is being put in peril by treason in the families of the descendants of the Prophet. It was held to be fatal to our Empire of the West, if treason were suffered to prosper in the house of the Ommeyades of Andalusia. I myself, my mother, and my sisters threw ourselves on our knees in tears at my father's feet and implored his mercy for my brother, who had been formally named as his

successor. It was not to be. He said, 'I am Caliph first, and father afterwards. As father I shall weep tears of blood for my son all my life. But as Caliph, I must purge this fair land of a traitor!' So our brother was bow-strung in the court of the Palace, and my father never had a happy day after. Here, see," said Hakim, with tears filling his eyes, "this is a paper attached to my father's testament. It runs thus, and is inscribed in his own scholarly hand :—'Fifty years have I been on this throne. Riches, honours, pleasures have been poured on me, and I have drained them all to the dregs. The Sovereigns, who are my rivals, respect me, or fear me—both envy me ; for all that men desire has been showered on me by Allah, the Bountiful, the All-merciful. But in all these years of apparent felicity I can only count fourteen days wherein I have been truly happy. My son, meditate on this, and judge at their true value human grandeur, this world, and man's life.'"

"Our priests talk thus," said Digenes, "but I never heard of an emperor who spoke such words."

"Remember," said Hakim, "that a Caliph, who descends from the Prophet and occupies his place, is at once a Prophet of Allah and Sovereign Lord—Priest, King, and Commander!"

The whole mission were present at the funeral of the great Caliph, which was conducted with extraordinary magnificence. Forty thousand troopers in full array on black barbs guarded the procession from the Palace to the royal burial-place in the hills outside the walls. The whole population of the city, the suburbs, and the country round came to honour their deceased Chief. Banners and trophies of war were displayed in profusion. The funeral procession itself was on foot. First came long files of Imaums, Sheiks, and learned elders, then a crowd of Dervishes, who chanted dirges of plaintive sounds ; slaves, attendants, and ministers ; and, at last, Hakim, the new Caliph, on foot and alone before the bier. The coffin of Abderrahman was covered with a carpet that had once been a relic in the mihrab of Mecca : it was borne on a platform raised on the shoulders of twelve gigantic guards in the uniform of the Palace troops. The envoys of Rome gazed on a sight which, accustomed as they were to the vast extent of Constantinople, and to the vehemence of a Byzantine populace, astonished them both by the enormous numbers of the people, and by their frenzied expressions of grief. The Deacon roundly insisted that more than one million of men and women had witnessed

or taken part in the funeral ceremony. As the bier of the great Caliph approached the crowd, and even long after it had passed, cries of grief and despair of Asiatic pungency and wild notes of agony re-echoed along the streets and across the squares of the city.

"We have seen the passing of a great man—of an Emperor truly beloved by his people," said Michael, the protocolist, in a low voice, to the Deacon. "What would the funeral of our own beloved Lord and Master be like, think ye, my friend?—aye, and what would be the funeral of his successor, if successor he is to have? Is it certain that Christ and His Blessed Mother have ordained that the Cross shall prevail for ever?"

CHAPTER XIV

THE CONQUEST OF ALEPPO

Some months have passed, and the scene changes to Asia. Nicephorus Phocas was now in supreme command of an immense host echelonned along the Cilician frontier, having its head-quarters at Cæsarea in Cappadocia. He bluntly refused the offer of the politic Prefect to occupy the Prefecture within the city ; and he had his quarters placed in the centre of the great camp, which lay in the plain beyond. Cæsarea was at that epoch a great and splendid city of the Empire, well situated on a branch of the noble river Halys, and within sight of the snowy peak of Mount Argæus, the highest point of the Taurus range. But Nicephorus disdained both for himself and his army the comforts of a luxurious city, to which he had forbidden all access by the troops. As a wealthy and populous centre of trade, as the point of junction for all the great highways, north, west, and south, Cæsarea formed an admirable base for a great expedition. The General himself had for his own use a small and simple camp tent, rudely equipped, and in no respect superior to the rest of the service baggage. Near it stood a larger tent in which he held councils and conferred with his staff and officers of rank.

His return to Byzantium after the conquest of Crete, and his ovation in the Hippodrome, where he presented to the Basileus the aged Kouropas of Crete and his son, Anemas, as prisoners of war, had called out such an explosion of popular enthusiasm that the inner cabinet of the Sacred Palace was alarmed, and Bringas, the Parakeimomenos, was filled with jealousy and rage. Unable to stem the torrent of public favour towards the victorious Commander, Bringas persuaded the Emperor to order Nicephorus to the Asian frontier. The wily Eunuch took care to load with honours and titles the enemy whom he was sending as far as possible from the capital. Romanus heaped on his victorious General magnificent presents, overwhelmed

him with gracious words, and gave him a rank equivalent to "Generalissimo of the Army Corps of the East." The interviews between the soldier and the Sovereign had been of a sort little known in the Sacred Palace.

Debauchery, excitement, and exhausting fatigues had wasted the splendid frame of Romanus. Pale, with wild eyes in their sunken sockets, and limbs trembling in all their joints, the young Basileus received his great officer with all the grace and good-nature for which he was conspicuous. He lavished on him every honour and every promise that he could imagine as likely to tempt the veteran; and, without sharing the jealousy of the Court Eunuch and without understanding his device, Romanus pressed on Nicephorus the command of the Eastern armies.

"My Lord Basileus," said the soldier, "I have done my duty to my God, and to my Sovereign, and by the blessing of Christ and His Mother in heaven I gave the best years of my life to this Empire of Rome. I am now about to retire to take thought of my own soul, to atone for the life of battle, of blood, and ruin in which it has been passed. I am resolved to take vows of monkhood, and to end the bitter dregs of life that are left to me in a hermitage on Mount Athos. My Lord, when you next summon me, you will learn that I am no longer your officer, but the solitary servant of Christ and of her who bore Him."

Neither entreaties, nor promises, nor commands could move the stubborn soul of the soldier. He left the presence with the barest observance of the prescribed ceremonies, saying, "Do not forget, mighty King of Rome, that there is in heaven above us a King over all Kings, and on earth, beside each of us, there is the Angel of Death, who but waits the signal from on high to strike."

As Nicephorus stalked away down the corridor amidst lines of Excubitors and Cubiculars, who could hardly decide whether to honour the great hero of the day or to slight the enemy of the all-powerful Eunuch, a chamberlain from the Empress brought him a summons to attend her in private audience. With a muttered excuse Nicephorus passed on with hastened strides. But at a turn of the corridor, Theophano herself, radiant with smiles, and in all the charm of her superb grace, confronted the veteran in his very path, and beckoned him into her closet alone.

"I overheard your terrible resolve," she said in a voice thrilling with entreaty as well as indignation, "but I will not believe that one who is the only hope and bulwark of our country, can deliver it over to the sons of Hagar and the followers of the False Prophet. Will you rest in peace in your cell, and whine out your *kyrie eleison* when you see the accursed Chamdas defile the altars of God, and chant prayers to Allah under the dome of the Holy Wisdom? Did the Mother of God vouchsafe you power to gain such glorious victories over the camel-driver and his race, that you thus abandon her people and her shrines to the abomination of desolation?" And she looked down on him majestic and inspired like the Cumæan Sibyl in Raphael's fresco at Rome.

"There are swords as good as mine," muttered the veteran, visibly abashed and humbled, "and younger men than I who have not my sins to wash out."

"Nicephorus, victor, hero," she cried with rapture, seizing his brawny hand in both of hers, "the army will follow none but you. You, you are the hero of all Rome and of all its tributary races. The rest are boys or martinets. Save us, protect us, comfort us, or we poor women may yet be swept into the hareems of the infamous libertines of Islam."

Nicephorus was speechless: a shudder shook his huge breast, but he could find no words.

"Have you no eyes?" she whispered, with that silver tone of fascination that was her peculiar secret and gift; "have you not seen that wine, lechery, and furious sports have marked that fribble you have just left to a premature doom? He will never see another summer. And when I am no longer Augusta, who will protect me and my babes? To whom could I look but to the hero whom all Roman men delight to follow, whom all Roman women trust and honour—trust and love?" she whispered, looking into his eyes and drawing herself slowly towards him till she gathered him in her arms and sobbed upon his shoulder. "Go to the Asian frontier, crush the Hagarene. You shall have from the Palace absolute power and authority, military and civil. You shall be the true Basileus in the field, before you return to be the Basileus in the Palace."

Then she rushed away in tears; and left the chieftain quite dazed, drunk with perplexity, and mad with passion.

So Nicephorus took up the command on the Eastern frontier,

having exacted from the Basileus and his ministers plenary authority to raise and equip an army, with power over all the forces and all the reserves of the Empire, civil and military, in any Theme of Asia. For some months he worked incessantly at his task, and mustered the most powerful army known to his age.

Nicephorus was now seated in the larger tent, to which he had summoned in council his chief officers. First came Basil Digenes, the Warden of the Marches, again Chief of the General's staff. Beside him was Bardas Skleros, Commander of the Armenian Guard, Leon Balantes, Bourtzes, and other generals. And last entered the illustrious John Tzimisces, the rival and ultimate successor of Nicephorus. An Armenian noble of the highest rank—his real nickname was Tchemeschguig, or the Little, a sound which no Greek throat could utter—John was the hero of a hundred desperate combats. His courage was even more reckless and romantic than that of Nicephorus, and, as a mere cavalry leader, he was almost the equal of the great Chief. Short of stature, he had prodigious strength, with the activity and suppleness of an acrobat. Matchless in all military exercises, and unrivalled in the lists, his frankness, generosity, and affable temper made him the idol of men, whilst his fiery beauty, grace, and high spirits made him the idol of women. In the matter of temperance, chastity, and piety, John was the very opposite of Nicephorus.

Nicephorus opened the Council thus—

"My comrades and commanders of the Eastern corps, I have summoned you to hear the plan of campaign, and to take counsel as to the task before each contingent of our host. The latest field state shows that we have a force of all arms of 213,000 men, of whom 42,000 are cavalry, with 112,000 horses, mules, asses, and camels; and these are in cantonments along the range of Taurus over against Cilicia, extending nearly 100 Roman miles. The details of the numbers and their exact position of encampment will remain for the present known only to myself and my secretaries. When the hour of advance has come, due orders will be issued to the commands which are to invade the enemy and to those which will remain in reserve."

"And may we know the day and the line of the advance, my Lord General?" broke in the impetuous John Tzimisces.

"The day and the place of invasion, my noble friend," said Nicephorus, with a dry smile, "must remain known to

God above—and to me. In a campaign such as this, we must rely on overwhelming numbers and lightning rapidity of execution to secure our end. The divided state of the Hagarenes will prevent them from meeting us in great pitched battles. But it is a vast territory in which they are settled, and the most difficult to invade in all God's earth. It bristles with forts on inaccessible rocks, with mountain defiles and dense woods, and is defended by a girdle of fortified towns. We have to pour down over these passes on all sides at once, like the snows in spring when they rush down the gorges of Taurus ; we must overwhelm these forts and towns like a sudden flood, and all Cilicia will be again within the fold of Rome—and of Christ."

"And when we have won back Cilicia, we shall have gained but a corner of the Empire of Chamdas, whose realm reaches to the Euphrates," broke in Bourtzes somewhat surlily.

"Most true, my Lord Bourtzes," replied the General, with a voice that vibrated with fervour and faith, "but that corner is the key of the power of Islam in Asia. When we hold Cilicia as a base, we will descend over the ranges of Amanus, even as we are about to push through those of Taurus. Then—Syria is ours again—is Christ's again. The sacred land in which our Saviour deigned to be born as man, the hill of Calvary whereon He died, the tomb wherein His Body lay till the third day, shall no longer be polluted by these dogs of Ishmael. After all these hundred years the Holy Land shall again be hallowed with the Cross ; Antioch, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, shall again be consecrated to the blessed Trinity and the Mother of God. We will push on to Mesopotamia beyond Euphrates, till the Empire of Rome has no frontier on the east but the Tigris, and no frontier on the south but the dry deserts of Arabia, into which the unholy race of Hagar shall be driven and made to abide. The Empire of our founder, Constantine, of Justinian, and of Heraclius, shall be restored in all its majesty and power. And the dogs who follow the False Prophet shall be kennelled again with the jackals of the desert."

Generals and secretaries listened in silent respect to this outburst of their Chief, who spoke like some priest at the altar, rather than as the leader of a mighty host arrayed for war.

"We are all eager to be at them," cried John Tzimisces, passionately. "Give us the hour, and our marching orders, and we will saddle this coming dawn."

"In good time, my valiant Lord Joannes. I well know your noble ardour for the fight. There are a thousand things that a commander-in-chief has had to prepare: and a few of these are still wanting. Our siege train is not yet complete, and we have at least fifty forts to capture—the remount chargers in reserve are not quite filled up—the reserve of arms is nearly full—the transport service is ready—and the hospital train; but the reports from the eastern defiles of the Cilician Clisuras have not yet all come in. There are still seven companies of vedettes who have yet to complete the intelligence survey of the distant passes."

"Will it be three days more—twice three days—as many weeks yet?" asked Bourtzes in his blunt way.

"God in heaven knows, my dear General," said the Chief, with his grim smile. "In the meantime, I have copies ready of the *Handbook of Tactics*, which I have been compiling during the last three months. Every commander of a division shall have it: my orders are that every chief officer shall thoroughly understand the rules of this kind of warfare, to which there are three main keys—rapidity of movement, exact knowledge of all the facts, foresight of every detail."

All next night the General sat in his tent with none but Basil Digenes and his chief secretary. He had called for the final recension of his book on *Tactics*, which he was explaining to the Lord Warden as he ran over the heads of the twenty-five chapters.

"Everything lies in this first chapter on scouting, and the distances between the vedettes," said the General, reading:—

"'In a very broken country, they must not be more than three or four Roman miles apart. The scouts may have to be away from the main army fifteen days, and must carry provisions for that time. They must explore every hill, stream, and road in the district they survey; never be stationary, but always on the move, and always in touch with the force they are serving.' Then take care they master that third chapter on 'occupying heights that flank a pass,' and 'on flank attacks on an enemy discovered to be on the march.' Then that eleventh chapter will be of the utmost importance in such a march as we shall make through the defiles of the Taurus—'how to survey and occupy in force the points that can command a defile which is to be forced.' Many and many a Roman army, from the time of the Caudine Forks down to that of Gongyles in Crete and poor

Pastilas this very last year, has been lost by neglecting this caution.

"Listen to this, my son," the Chief continued, reading from his own book :—"'This war is one of cavalry. Victory does not depend on numbers, but on prudence, on rapidity, on ingenuity, so that a stroke may be delivered when, and where, it is least expected by the enemy. War against these children of the desert on their own light horses, and with camels as transports, has wholly changed since the epoch of pitched battles. If you are swift enough, alert enough, keen enough, if you are well served by your scouts, spies, and signallers, you may defeat a battalion with a mere detachment, and an army with only a battalion.'

"'Then attend to your signal service. Pick the sharpest eyes, the keenest brains in your force, and take care that the chain of signals is never broken. The one thing essential is to conceal from your enemy your own movements, and your objective. Every advance must be covered by feints. March as far as possible by night : and choose moonless nights.'

"Then as to night attacks. 'These are exceedingly dangerous, unless carried out with fitting conditions ; which are—a thorough knowledge of the ground attacked—assaults delivered simultaneously on many sides at once—trustworthy guides, and intelligent officers. The assaults must converge to an instant : they must be invisible till they strike : and they must be directed by a single mind!' In this war we must constantly resort to night assaults," said Nicephorus, as he handed the volume to the Lord Warden.

"The first thought of a General, my son, is to have his men well rationed, honestly paid, well clothed, and well mounted. It is a scandal how these courtiers and clerks at home stint the soldier of his food, his pay, and his rewards.

"You may wonder that I think it needful in our day of glory to recite at such pains the way in which these accursed Infidels are to be defeated. Ah! who can say what is before us in the future? Bardas Cæsar and my mother's brother, Constantine Meleinos, won victories by these tactics. And I myself have seen them successful in six hundred fights, great or small. If you follow these precepts, my dear young Warden, you will win an equal success—remembering always this, that it is not thou who art victor, but that the victory is given thee by Christ, our Saviour—very God and very man."

The General now sat alone in his tent studying the reports and rough sketch maps sent him from a score of advanced posts. His secretary brought him a missive just received by a relay of royal posts from the Sacred Palace.

From the Parakeimomenos (Lord High Chamberlain) to the Grand Domestic (or Marshal) of the Army Corps of the East, Nicephorus, the Victorious, and so forth—after compliments, eulogies, and promises in profusion—the mighty Bringas proceeds to explain that the Council of his Majesty, the Basileus, are so anxious that nothing should imperil the life and glory of the General-in-Chief, that they desire him to remain in reserve with an army in Cæsarea, and to entrust the advance into the enemy's territories to the illustrious Commander, John Tzimisces, whose failure to succeed would not so fatally endanger the safety of Empire—and more excellent reasons for keeping Nicephorus in the background and idle.

"So ho!" said the General to himself, with a grim smile, "he would pit John against me, and throw me into the shade. Too late, my honest Eunuch, too late! The orders to march at dawn have gone forth this very night. But is Tzimisces a party to the plot? Never! he is too noble a spirit. I would trust John with my life."

Another missive came in, brought by a private messenger. It was from Leo, the brother of Nicephorus, who was watching his interests in Constantinople.

"The voice of all Rome is loud for the house of Phocas, and the name of the victor of Crete is on every tongue. But the Arch-Eunuch is plotting night and day against you, turning now to the exiled Prince, now to Tzimisces. Our Autocrator himself is nearer than ever to his God. It is thought he will keep his Christmas in heaven; and they do say—that art is assisting sin and disease to make an angel of him. Strike—and strike quickly, and be careful that you celebrate a triumph in the Hippodrome within three months. Three months is the longest period that it is safe for you to be absent."

"Yes! in three months' time I shall be in the Golden Horn or in my grave," said Nicephorus, and he flung himself on his couch—with a few prayers as he kissed the *ikon* of the Mother of God. As he raised his eyes, he saw a slip of parchment that, without his knowledge, had been hung at the foot of the image. It was folded and addressed—"To the Hero of Rome and Defender of Christ." Within were these words in the

Armenian tongue—"She who loves thee warns thee to win a glorious victory over the Hagarene and then to hasten back to Rome. The Augusta is racked with anxiety and foreboding. In three months she will be a widow. There is but one who could protect her—and console her."

The General crushed the parchment in his fierce grip—and then thrust it into his breast. He tossed on his couch for hours, with a storm of passions chasing each other across his soul.

Before dawn the great host had begun its advance. The General, in the centre of his staff, was receiving and dispatching mounted couriers, who every minute came and went to and fro. Through seven different passes of the Taurus, mainly through that known as the "Cilician Gates," the various corps debouched down upon the Saracen province that had once been the Cilicia of Augustus and Trajan. The different armies had separate objectives, but were kept in close touch with each other, and each was preceded by an outer screen of light cavalry, which pressed on in front and scoured the whole country. As the parallel forces poured down like a deluge on the rich plains, the miserable people fled before them or crowded into the forts; the Saracen troops of all arms were seized with panic, and made no effort to stem the torrent. Fort after fort, walled towns, castles, and camps fell rapidly into the hands of the invading Christians. The overwhelming numbers that Nicephorus had collected covered the country for a hundred miles. By light siege train, hurried forward, they captured fortresses by escalade. Tarsus, Adana, Mopseutia, and Seleucia were taken by storm. The gallant Emir of Aleppo, Seîf Eddaulêh, of the dynasty of Hamdan, the hero of the Saracens of Asia in the tenth century, whom the Greeks called the "Accursed Chamdas," yielded before the avalanche. He ordered his men to retreat inland towards Syria and to attempt nothing but separate and small encounters to harass the line of communications. The host poured on, the Arab historian declares, "like hungry wolves," ravaging the land, burning villages and destroying all crops and stores which they could not use. Karamountis, the Emir of Tarsus, attempted a pitched battle, but was utterly defeated and left five thousand of his men dead upon the field: the rest being prisoners of war. All the calculations of the Roman General were fulfilled. Every order had been carried out to the letter. Every corps reached

the point at which it was directed at the appointed time. The whole of Cilicia was swept as by a tornado. And within twenty-two days, the Arab historian, Aboulfaradj, relates that fifty-five fortresses and forty-five towns had fallen into the hands of the Christians. Enormous booty and tens of thousands of prisoners were taken ; and after three centuries, the rich and broad land, watered by the Cydnus and the Pyramus, and lying between the range of Taurus and the Mediterranean Sea, passed again into the realm of Christ and of Rome.

There was a halt to concentrate the forces, collect the booty, and to reinforce or refresh the army after its tremendous rush. And secret dispatches had again reached the Commander. An unsigned missive in the Armenian tongue warned him again that the Augustus was in delirium, at the verge of death, that the Augusta commanded his return to save the Empire and herself from ruin. A later missive from his brother, Leo, assured him that the Basileus had revived and might live yet some months. Go on and conquer. "Drive the accursed blasphemer, Chamdas, from his last lair in Syria. Then return and triumph!"

Nicephorus resumed his onward march in earnest. He had now received reinforcements of twenty thousand fresh cavalry, bringing up his effective force to over two hundred thousand troops, including thirty thousand engineers and sappers with ample engines of siege and storm. As the vast range of Taurus had lain between the Empire and the Saracen in Cilicia, so now the range of the Amanus divided it from the provinces of Syria, Damascus, and Aleppo. Anazarba, Sis, and other strong forts were swept away, their defenders ruthlessly slaughtered, and their homes sacked. But nothing could arrest the invaders till they poured over the passes of Amanus down into the valley of the Orontes, and reached the great plains which stretch away from the "Gates of Syria" to the Euphrates. Once across the defiles of the Amanus range, Nicephorus concentrated his whole force for a plunge upon Aleppo, the seat and capital of "the accursed Chamdas."

Aleppo, which the Greeks called Chalepe, and the Saracens called Haleb, was then the most splendid and the richest city of Asia, having some quarter of a million of inhabitants, and was the centre of the trade between East and West. Its magnificent palaces, in the midst of gardens teeming with all the flowers and shrubs of the Asiatic plains, its immense circuit of

walls, towers, domes, and minarets, were crowned by the tremendous fortress on the almost precipitous acropolis that rose above the plain in which the city stood. At a glorious sunrise, early in December, Nicephorus gathered his principal officers around him on an eminence from whence in the distance the white towers of Aleppo could be clearly seen. "There lies the lair of the blaspheming Hagarene who has wrought such havoc upon the people of Christ and the realm of Rome. Within those proud walls are the savage horsemen who have burnt a thousand homes and have slaughtered ten thousand of our brothers. Aye, and within those gay and lordly palaces, with their smiling groves and terraces, there are ten thousand of our sisters, daughters, and boys who have been ravished from Christian hearths and turned from Christ to defile themselves with the False Prophet, his lies and his fornications. By God and His mercy, we will keep Christmas like Christians within the very walls and mosques where He has been blasphemed these long three hundred years."

The city was now entirely invested. All the efforts of the Emirs to relieve it were cut off with immense losses. And almost on the eve of Christmas Day the order was given for a combined assault. The walls were carried in a dozen places at once; the gallant Chamdas was driven back step by step into the citadel on the heights, and by nightfall the splendid city of Aleppo was entirely in the hands of the Romans. The booty was enormous: for the rush of Nicephorus upon the capital had been so sudden that nothing had been removed. Three hundred and ninety thousand gold pieces were found in the Saracen Treasury; thousands of horses, mules, and camels in the barracks. Gold plate, exquisite damascened work, jewelled arms, brocades, embroideries, ivories, carpets, vases, robes, and painted manuscripts were tossed about in wild confusion. For days the scene of plunder, bloodshed, and destruction raged. The superb palace of the Emir, filled with precious things, was sacked, and then consumed with fire. And everything which the victorious troops could neither use nor transport was burnt or destroyed. The ramparts of the great city were levelled, the mosques were ruined, and the minarets thrown down in the dust.

The General, with fierce exultation, surveyed the annihilation of the terrible enemy who had made the Roman Empire reel to its foundations, and he saw that the frontiers of Rome were

destined to extend again to the Euphrates. Thereupon he ordered a solemn *Te Deum* to be chanted in presence of a great muster of chiefs and chosen detachments of his army. Before the crucifix, which was raised beside the central altar, the fierce Soldier of the Cross thrice prostrated himself in the dust, and offered up a silent prayer of thanksgiving; and then the psalm of praise was chanted forth by ten thousand voices in unison.

As Nicephorus returned to his head-quarters he found a missive to him from Constantinople. It was unsigned, and in the Armenian language. It ran thus: that "the throne of Constantine and Basil would be vacant before the message could reach its destination."

CHAPTER XV

EMPRESS AND CHAMBERLAIN

It was a gloomy day in March 963, when an unwonted stir of officials, chamberlains, and equerries was seen to throng the gates, corridors, and chambers of the Sacred Palace. The Empress, in her private apartments, lay pale and feeble on her couch, after the very recent birth of her fourth child, Anna, destined one day to be the wife of Vladimir, Prince of the Russians. The roses on Theophano's cheek were now faded to a marble hue; and, as her lovely head lay in sleep, she looked like one of the dying daughters of Niobe as carved by the hand of Praxiteles. But the noise of urgent messengers at the door roused her from her slumber: and in her soft voice, which retained its imperious tone with all its exquisite modulation, she bade them tell her what was being reported. Her deep eyes seemed even more lustrous and penetrating than ever as they shone from out the unwonted pallor of her face. "Tell me, Glaucopis, what they say," she murmured.

"Most august lady," said the nurse, "the physicians have strictly forbidden us to disturb your Majesty with any news."

"Romanus is dead?" she gasped out with a fierce gleam in her eyes, as she raised herself on her arm from the pillow; "when—how—where is his body?"

"Madam, the Emperor is being brought into the Sacred Chamber; not dead, but fainting, unconscious, and they say dying. He insisted, in spite of all the warnings of his physicians, on going out to hunt the boar last night in the forest, and he was seized with a fainting fit early this morning. We can hear the bearers of his litter even now in the corridor."

"And has my messenger returned from Cæsarea?" asked the Augusta eagerly, catching her breath with excitement.

A small sealed slip of parchment was handed to the Empress. She tore open the scrip, and a fierce gleam shot from her eyes as she read the Armenian words—*I come.*

She raised herself in her couch with a strange force of will, and had herself supported between two black eunuchs of the chamber and carried into the Sacred *Koitôn*, where at that very moment they were bearing to his death-bed the still unconscious form of the Basileus. The gaunt limbs of the once stalwart Romanus were a sight hardly so pitiful as his emaciated and bloodless countenance, now plainly stamped with the hue of death. As the physicians and chamberlains carefully stripped off the rough accoutrements of the chase, and laid him gently in his silken robe on the bed, his wife gazed intently upon him, with a look of penetration and anxiety rather than of sorrow or of love. Was he dead? Was he dying? What space of time could she count as her own? To whom could she turn for help?

"Madam," whispered the chief physician, "he still lives. His marvellous strength of constitution and strict care may even yet save him for a short space. The one chance of life is perfect rest, absolute silence. The slightest exertion, the smallest excitement, will be instantly fatal. He asks for a draught of strong Samian wine—but we dare not give it. It will be certain death. Let us implore your Majesty to leave him to us, to spare him the shock of an interview. It would be his death."

Theophano did not move nor answer: she gazed intently into the face of the dying King. At last his eyes opened, and the flicker of a feeble smile played round his drawn lips. She bent down and kissed them.

"Anastasia," he murmured, "forgive me, pardon all my wrong. I have always loved you ever since I went mad for your sake in the hermit's chapel of Saint Demetrius in the Asian forest, and for love of you risked the Golden Throne which I am now leaving to you. May you be happy in it, my early love, my only love, and guard our children till they can fill it better than I have done."

"Are you leaving it to me, indeed?" asked the Empress eagerly; "have you sealed such a will? Is any testament signed?"

"It shall be, if you wish it," murmured the dying man. "Send for my secretaries and the keeper of the archives."

Here the physician drew the Empress aside and earnestly whispered in her ear—"It would be certain death for him to make such an effort. His one chance of life is absolute rest."

"It is the will of his Majesty," said Theophano imperiously, "that all present should withdraw, all—save this scribe," she added, turning to a secret agent of her own. "Close and secure these doors in the name of your Sovereign Lord," she called aloud to the ushers and guards of the Sacred *Koitôn*.

"My will is that my beloved wife, the Empress, be Regent of this Empire during the minority of my sons, the Basileis, Basil and Constantine," murmured, or rather gasped the dying man; almost mechanically repeating the words that Theophano dictated aloud to him, or nodding a feeble assent, whilst the scribe copied them down in official form.

A loud altercation was now heard at the door of the chamber; and a terrified chamberlain announced that the great Parakeimomenos himself, the Eunuch Bringas, insisted on his right to enter the chamber by virtue of his office—that of the Imperial "Bedfellow."

"It is the will of his Majesty that he withdraw and wait in the anteroom," hissed the Empress. "Guards, do your duty, in the name of your Sovereign!" And Bringas was forcibly thrust back from the chamber.

"I nominate you—my wife—as Regent. Bringas—will be—your counsellor—your minister," gasped the dying King, as he heard the name of his terrible master.

"And shall not the glorious Lord General of the East be confirmed in his office?" whispered Theophano, with the eagerness of frenzy. But the strain of this interview had already overcome the flickering strength of the dying man, who fell back in another fainting fit that almost seemed death.

Then Theophano bade the scribe fetch from her own chamber a flagon of strong cordial that stood beside her bed. She moistened the lips of her dying lord; and, as he sipped a few spoonfuls of the drink, a last spurt of life came back to him. He opened his eyes and even raised his head, hoarsely calling for the cup. A mouthful seemed to give him new strength. "Since you desire it, my beloved," he gasped, "I confirm the Lord Domestic of the East in his supreme command. To Nicephorus I leave this throne—my children—my wife. He alone is worthy to possess them. They are his. May he keep them." He then grasped the flagon nervously; and with hungry eyes besought his wife to give it him—besought with his eyes, for he was now speechless.

Theophano knelt down beside the low couch, and, folding

her arms round her half-conscious lord, she raised him on his pillows. Then she held the flagon to his lips and gave it him to drink. He sucked in the strong wine like a beast that has been dying of thirst, until the action of swallowing had ceased to be possible. The last dregs of the cup oozed out of the corners of his mouth and poured over his bare throat. He lay back—dead.

Theophano gazed on him with a look of triumph. Then she seized the parchment whereon the scribe had written down the last will of the Emperor. She took up the pen and placed it in the still soft hand of the dead man; holding his hand in her own, she made the pen rudely inscribe his name—

Romanos, Basileus Romaiôn.

For a brief space she stood there over the dead body of her husband, herself pale and faint with the effort, looking like a marble statue of the Angel of Death, as she pondered what should be her next act, for she well knew how tremendous a crisis was at hand.

Her meditations were broken by loud and angry altercations at the door. And soon there burst into the chamber the gigantic form of the Parakeimomenos. The Eunuch Bringas had now placed himself at the head of the chief officials and members of the Council of State. He brought Michael, the Chancellor of the Exchequer; Symeon, the Chief Secretary; Sisinnios, the Head of the Senate; magistroi, patricians, proto-spathaires, basilikoi, with a strong force of ushers and Palace guards. The physicians proved the death of the Emperor, and closed his eyes. Theophano, at the first sound of the interruption, had on her part summoned from her private apartments her own creatures, secretaries, chamberlains, and guards. The two factions now confronted each other, ranged on opposite sides of the Imperial couch, whereon lay the yet untended corpse of the Basileus: Bringas, at the head of the Council of State on the one side, Theophano, on the other side, holding in her hands the last testament of the dead King.

"As Parakeimomenos, Grand Chamberlain of his late Majesty, and President of the Council of State, it is my right to order the ceremony for the burial of our late Lord Romanus, and, furthermore, to provide for the urgent needs of this Empire of Rome until the accession of our young Basileis," said Bringas, in a voice of proud command. "You, madam, for whom our

late revered Sovereign has made no written provision, as I am authorised to declare, may withdraw to the apartments reserved for the secluded widowhood of the relict of an Autocrat of the Romans."

With a will as strong and a voice as clear, Theophano replied, "Here I, as Regent of the Empire by the last will of my late beloved Lord and Emperor, summon the Council to receive my commands. There is no Great Chamberlain of any dead man. The death of an Emperor dissolves his Council of State. Here is the testament of my Lord Romanus, signed by his own hand, as these secretaries and lawyers who were present at the execution of it will testify on the sacred Gospels and the *ikon* of the Mother of God." And, with a look of triumph and defiance, Theophano held aloft the scoll, and in a firm voice read it aloud to the amazed and hesitating throng.

"A forged document," shouted Bringas. "I know that no such testament exists. Its authenticity must be proved by something more than Gospels and *ikons*. Let us have this document, madam, and it shall be duly examined by the judges of the law."

The Eunuch and his party advanced to wrest the parchment from the Empress by force, when a new interruption arose, and another large party entered the chamber. It was the Patriarch, Polyeuctus, bearing the miracle-working crucifix from the high altar of the Holy Wisdom, with his canons and acolytes, carrying the host. He had hastened to the Palace on the news of the agony of the Emperor, and was profoundly shocked to find that he had arrived too late to administer the last rites. In words of passionate grief the venerable prelate deplored the terrible calamity which had fallen on the royal house by the sudden death of the Basileus, unhouseled, unaneled, in his sins. He bitterly reproached both factions, who stood beside the untended corpse of their Sovereign contending for mastery. He listened to the claim of Bringas; he inspected the testament which Theophano still held in her clutch; and he suffered two scribes to swear on the *ikon* that they had heard the Emperor dictate the words and had seen him sign it with his own hand.

"My children, my daughter, princes, senators, and officers of Rome," said the venerable Patriarch, "it will bring down on us and on this Empire the judgment of God and of His Son, that we should strive for power amongst ourselves whilst the unanointed body of our late Lord lies here in its abandonment.

Our first duty is to provide for the funeral rites. As to the succession to this throne, and the regency of the Empire, it is the appointed task of the Senate and patricians to ordain these in due course of law and custom. The Senate has been convoked and is now about to meet. Thither let those who have the right to sit in it repair. As I hurried past the Augustëon hither, I saw the streets filled with excited crowds of citizens. I would warn you both who stand here in contention, such as this city will not witness with any patience, that we heard no shouts of 'Long live the venerated Augusta,' nor of 'Long live the Lord Great Chamberlain.' The only name that now echoes through our city, where men congregate and speak, is the name of Nicephorus Phocas, the ever-victorious General of the Eastern armies."

The keen intellects of Theophano and of Bringas at once perceived all the risks of a popular revolution in the midst of a disputed succession; and both factions admitted the force of the Patriarch's appeal, as well as the imminent peril to the State and to their own lives, if the Government remained unsettled for another hour. At the meeting of the Senate, which immediately followed, the eloquence and authority of the Patriarch succeeded in securing a settlement which was in the nature of a compromise. Theophano was duly installed as Regent during the minority of her two sons; but she was forced to accept the mighty Eunuch and his confederates, the late ministers, and to reappoint them to the offices they held. Bringas saw himself thus invested with practical mastery of the State, whilst the Patriarch and the majority of the Senate supported the demand of the Regent, that Nicephorus should be retained in supreme command as Grand Marshal of the East.

The duel between Theophano and Bringas was only withdrawn from public view, but it was carried on as fiercely as ever. The Regent dispatched messenger after messenger to the General to hasten his return to the capital. The Eunuch, on his side, was exerting all his arts to keep the great soldier on the frontier and secretly to put him away. At the next meeting of the Council, which the woman was unable to attend, prostrated as she was by the desperate efforts she had made in her delicate condition, the wily Bringas thus spoke—

"Lords of the Council and Ministers of State, our first duty after providing for the funeral of our late Sovereign, the august

Autocrat now with God, will be to secure the throne of his infant children, the Basileis, to whom the succession falls of right and by his own devise. Their rights are menaced by many enemies, both without and within the realm: perhaps not least by the disordered ambition of one who ought to be their most disinterested friend. But of all the disordered ambitions by which this Empire is beset, the danger most urgent and imminent is to be found in the Far East. A fortunate soldier, intoxicated with the favour of his Emperor and—may we not say?—the smiles of his Empress, has seduced the giddy populace of this city to welcome him as their idol and prepare to raise him to the very Purple itself. I hold the evidence of this conspiracy to bring about a revolution and proclaim him as Basileus. The Government, the dynasty itself, stands on the edge of an abyss. His triumph would mean confusion in this city, exile, confiscation, death, no doubt, for each of us. My Lords, I propose a peremptory order to Nicephorus Phocas to prosecute the war towards the East, and not to come west of the Anatolian Theme on pain of attainder and death."

"If this evidence is made public," said Michael, "the people will soon forsake their favourite, and justify the precautions we take." And the councillors seemed ready to accept the proposal.

The wily Eunuch saw his opportunity and sought to push it home. "Indeed, my Lords," he said, with an insinuating tone, "it would be wiser perhaps if we went further and secretly named some illustrious soldier with authority to supersede and arrest so dangerous a man. The late reigns of our Autocrats, Constantine Born-in-the-Purple, and his son, Romanus, have introduced a dangerous laxity towards treason. Time was when a popular general, suspected of rebellion, was seized and deprived of his eyesight. Methinks we should all feel our heads safer on our shoulders if the hero of the hour were treated as was Belisarius when he was degraded by the great Justinian, or as another Phocas who was justly put to death by our ancestors."

But here the Eunuch overshot his mark. The arch-priest of St. George of the Stoudion vehemently protested against such language as applied to the victorious chief who had laid Islam low; and the rest of the Council dreaded the fury of the people, if the hero were sacrificed by his rivals. The Council parted; nor could Bringas obtain from it anything more than a peremptory order to Nicephorus to prosecute the war to the

borders as far as the Tigris and the Euphrates. The astute Minister was not easily beaten from his purpose, knowing, as he did, that his hold on power, and perhaps his liberty and even his life, depended on the issue. Profiting by the enforced absence of the Regent, whose exertions had brought on a dangerous collapse, he inveighed at every Council, in public and in private, against the ambitious schemes of the great Commander of the East, and he opened secret negotiations with officers on the General's own staff. These intrigues were countermined and reported to Nicephorus by agents of Theophano, who spied out all the machinations of the Eunuch. He and his partisans still believed the General to be preparing for a fresh advance into Syria; they were sitting in Council in the Privy Chamber of the Cenourgion, and considering a new scheme to isolate Nicephorus from his friends, when loud shouts were heard in the streets and squares, and even from the Palace itself could be seen a crowd of small craft and boats under the very walls of the Boucoleon Port. A chamberlain burst into the Council Hall with the tremendous news that Nicephorus himself was in the act of landing from the Asiatic shore, and was actually making his way to the Palace by the *New Basilica*, built by the Emperor, Basil I.

"Our agents have played us false then," stammered Bringas, "in keeping his journey secret. But he cannot have brought his army, or even a division of it, without our knowledge."

"My Lord," said the chamberlains, "we have certain intelligence that he has hurried hither by forced posts—alone, or with only a few of his personal followers."

"The Lord has delivered him into our hands," shouted Bringas in triumph, "we will have him seized as a traitor and a rebel before he can rouse the city or gather an armed force. Put out his eyes, and he will give no more trouble." And the swarthy countenance of the Eunuch glowed with a fierce gleam, as a beast of prey that has seized his victim. The roar of the populace outside grew louder and nearer, minute by minute; and more than one councillor shrank from signing the order which Bringas had already got prepared for the executioners whose duty it was to blind prisoners with red-hot needles.

Suddenly the door of the hall was thrown open, and Nicephorus Phocas, in the military uniform of his service, burst in upon the Council, attended only by his faithful Digenes and three or four other officers.

"In the name of our Sovereigns, the Basileis, I order the arrest of this traitor and rebel. He is conspiring against their throne, and is defying the command of the State to remain in the Asian frontier. Guards, seize that man and bind him fast. I answer as lawful authority for this order," said Bringas in a voice of thunder.

"I am no traitor nor rebel," said Nicephorus proudly, with slow and measured utterance. "I come here as Magistros and Grand Domestic of the Eastern armies to swear allegiance to our young Basileis and to their mother, the lawful Regent by the will of our late Emperor. I come to claim my right to a public triumph for my victorious campaigns in Syria against the Infidel. And I come to claim my right, by the will of our late Lord, to be invested as General-in-Chief of the armies of the East."

"The pretexts of a traitor," cried Bringas fiercely. "Guards, do your duty and seize this rebel!"

Nicephorus stood almost alone in the midst of a hostile Council of his enemies, supported by Ministers of the State and by a strong armed force. Fearless as he was, the General now felt that his precipitate act had driven him into a veritable den of wild beasts thirsting for his blood.

Again the door opened, this time on the side of the Empress's apartments, and Theophano appeared, pale as death, and hardly able to stand, with a proud gleam in her royal eyes. She was borne along by chamberlains, and attended by her own officials, and by those members of the Council of State on whom she could count. She calmly moved towards the Imperial throne and took her seat as President—Empress and Regent by undisputed right.

"My Lords," she said with dignity, "the General of the Eastern armies is here by our Imperial summons, to take the oath of fealty to myself as Regent and to my sons, the Basileis; to be duly invested in the great command which my late Lord committed to him, and to present to the people, as of old, the triumph in the Hippodrome for the victories by which he has justified his title to that high office."

"Surely, madam," the Eunuch broke in, "the triumph should be adjourned until the campaign of the East is concluded. The accursed Chamdas is still unbroken. He yet holds his inner fortress of Aleppo. And it is to be seen if he will not be soon as formidable as ever."

"My Lord Great Chamberlain and Lords of the Council," replied the Regent, "the victories that the Marshal of the East has won are the most glorious of which Rome can boast since the ages of our ancestors, Heraclius or Justinian, of pious and immortal memory. Crete has been restored to our Empire after lying for a hundred and thirty years under the iron heel of the Infidel. The spoil, the wealth, the stores that are the prize of war exceed anything ever yet seen in New Rome. The boundaries of the Empire have been moved again east to the rivers of Mesopotamia. No captain since Belisarius has ever won such renown—and, let me remind you, such popular favour and trust. We must decree him the triumph that is his of right—for let me warn you that, to refuse it whilst the city is wild with excitement, and our bravest troops are making their cantonments resound with shouts for their 'Ever-Victorious Commander,' would be to imperil the security of our State, to shake the dynasty to its foundations, and, indeed, to risk the very lives of those who are known to be his public enemies." And she turned with a dangerous flash in her eyes upon the Eunuch. "And for the loyalty of the Lord General, my Lords," she added, "I myself, Augusta and Regent, am ready to answer."

Here the roar of the vast crowds around the Palace, and shouts, borne over sea and land, of our "Ever-Victorious Nicephorus Phocas," joined to the powerful and indeed unanswerable appeal of the Empress, made the Council waver and drove dismay into the soul of Bringas. He dared no longer to resist openly, and made politic excuses whilst he signed the orders for the installation of the Chief as Generalissimo, and for his immediate celebration of the triumph.

"The Council has risen," said Theophano in her grandest tone, "and the ceremony of homage to ourselves and to our sons and the installation of the Grand Domestic shall take place forthwith in our Privy Chamber," and she beckoned imperiously to Nicephorus to attend her at once.

Homage and installation were duly performed according to the ceremonial of that most ceremonious of courts. All were at last dismissed; but a secret message from the Empress recalled the General to a private interview alone in her own cabinet.

He fell on his knees, and, seizing her hand in his, he kissed it with passion. Looking up to her with all the fervour with which he had ever invoked the Mother of God in his prayers, he

murmured, "My Queen, my saviour, my good angel, you have saved my life and my honour!"

"I have saved your life, indeed, and at the risk of my own. I may die of this battle for your sake—but I shall die with joy. My hero, my Lord and Master, you and I are henceforth one. We will rule Rome together, side by side, or die in each other's arms."

Then Theophano bent down to the hero as he knelt at her feet, she threw her bare arms round his neck, and printed on his brow a long, melting, fervid kiss, which thrilled through the veteran to the marrow of his bones.

At this moment the curtain over the door of the cabinet was half pushed aside by a massive arm in an embroidered robe. Bringas had ventured to make a last appeal to the Regent, and had suddenly sought her in her privy cabinet.

Standing behind them, himself unseen, he watched the embrace, and stealthily withdrew without a word. It burst on the astute mind of the Eunuch like a thunderclap how it was that he had been outwitted and rebuffed. He saw his own danger and the forces arrayed against him. He was no longer dealing merely with the intrigues of a woman and the ambition of a soldier. He saw that the man and the woman, who of all Rome had the greatest influence, were now bound together in love as well as in policy. He felt how strong was the combination against him, but it made him more fiercely resolved to win in the strife.

The wild excitement of the great city would not suffer the triumph to be delayed beyond the days required to bring across from Asia picked detachments of the victorious army, the principal prisoners of war, and the trophies, spoils, and standards. The ceremonies began with a solemn *Pannychid*—a succession of magnificent *Te Deums* chanted in the great church continuously all through the night, in presence of a crowd of dignitaries, senators, officials, soldiers, and prelates, adorned in State robes, amidst a blaze of lamps from a thousand chandeliers, whilst the ladies of the Court crowded into the galleries beneath the mosaic domes of the Holy Wisdom. Then took place the triumph itself, on a scale even more magnificent than that which Nicephorus had celebrated on his return from Crete. From the country round, and from the towns on the Thracian and Asian shores, and on both sides of the Bosphorus, masses of people poured

in, so that the enormous city was one continuous throng from Golden Horn to Golden Gate. From early dawn the vast procession of troops on foot and on horse, of prisoners in chains, camels, horses, trophies, and gold and silver vessels was extended along the "Middle" street, which had been decorated for the occasion with wreaths, flowers, tapestries, flags, and Byzantine, or what we now call "Venetian" masts.

At length the Hippodrome was reached. On its tiers of seats up to the marble colonnades were seated one hundred thousand spectators in gala dress according to their rank. The *cataphracti*, or mailed cuirassiers, came first, and were followed by detachments of light-armed bowmen from the Anatolian mountains and Macedonian shieldmen in close phalanx. After them advanced Thracian and Albanian spearmen, wild Scythian Cossacks, and at last a corps of Varangian battle-axe foot-soldiers of the guard. Next were led detachments of the finest Arab chargers, taken from the stable of Chamdas' own palace, with their brilliant trappings, arms and accoutrement of gorgeous tones and Oriental fantasy of ornament. Then came the camels taken from the Saracens, bearing the embroideries, standards, pennons, carpets, tents, kettledrums and trumpets, with the general spoil of variegated colours and in confused mass. A wild shout arose from the benches on either side as the Hagarene captives in white tunics were driven forward; and, as they were forced to prostrate themselves in the dust before the Imperial balcony, the whole Circus, at the signal of the Precentors of the Factions, broke out into the ceremonial chant as ordained in the Book of Rites:—

"Glory to God who has given us this triumph over the children of Hagar! Glory to God who has laid in the dust the cities of the Saracens! Glory to God who has confounded those who mock at the Mother of God!

"By the just judgment of God our enemies have been thrust down! The horse and his rider hath He cast into the sea!

"Thy right hand, O Lord, hath become glorious in power: Thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy.

"Who is like unto Thee, O Lord? who is like Thee, glorious in holiness, doing wonders?

"Thou in Thy mercy hast led forth the people which Thou hast redeemed!

"The Lord shall reign for ever and ever!"

So the *Te Deum* rang, led by the trained choirs of the Factions,

each under their musical directors. The entire audience of the Circus joined in, and the familiar chant was taken up by the vast crowds outside the Hippodrome, until from some hundred thousand voices in unison the song of triumph was borne across the waters far away.

It was a scene that combined the barbarous splendours of a triumph by the Scipios and Cæsars of Old Rome—the fierce exultation of the tribes of Israel recorded in the Book of Exodus—and the majestic pomp of a *Te Deum* celebrated as a religious rite with all the fervour of the Orthodox Church.

The long procession of the trophies and spoils of the Saracens of Syria and Aleppo was closed by that trophy which, to the people of Byzantium, outweighed in value all the gold and silver, the gems, the embroideries, the damascene arms, and the enamels. This was a silver-gilt and jewelled case containing battered fragments of the camel's-hair tunic of St. John the Baptist. This inestimable relic had fallen into the hands of the Infidel on the capture of the Holy City by Omar. For more than three centuries it had remained in the hands of the Hagarenes. The recovery of this precious relic had seemed to the delighted populace a glory to be placed beside the restoration of the true cross to Jerusalem by the Emperor Heraclius.[1]

As the last notes of the chant died away the hero of the hour was seen to enter the Hippodrome from the Forum of Constantine, from whence the roar of the people had already reached the expectant crowds in the Circus. Nicephorus, in his golden panoply, covered with the crimson military cloak, stood in the brazen chariot of State which was drawn by four milk-white chargers led by grooms on foot. As he advanced slowly round the vast Circus, the shouts of the assembly broke out with a frenzy of cheers. And the choirs took up the chant again. "Long live the Ever-Victorious Commander!—Son of God! give him many happy years!—Son of God! strengthen his arm in battle!—Son of God! give the victory to this Thy people of Rome! Long years to our Basileis, whose loyal servants we are! May this Holy Empire of Rome be preserved for ever and ever!"

With these prayers to Heaven resounding in the great amphitheatre, the victorious Marshal advanced to the eastern end, at

[1] This Holy Tunic of the Baptist was kept reverentially in Constantinople for 240 years, when it became the prize of the Latin conquerors in 1204, and was carried off by Robert de Clari to the Abbey of Corbie.

which stood the *Cathisma*, or Imperial Tribune, where Theophano, in her robes of State, blazing with gold brocade and jewels, sat between her two infants, the joint Basileis, Basil II. and Constantine VIII., as they were destined to become. The milk-white chargers were reined in, and the car was halted at the foot of the stairs. Then Nicephorus, escorted by chamberlains and officers, both military and civil, stepped from his chariot, and ascended the staircase to the Imperial throne. There he ungirt his sword and laid it at the feet of the Empress ; and, prostrating himself on the ground, he offered his homage by kissing the fringe of her robe, and by placing his hands upon the knees of the two wondering royal children.

Amidst thunders of applause from the vast arena and renewed chants of "Long life to the Ever-Victorious Commander ! Long years to our august Basileis ! God preserve this Holy Empire of Rome !" the soldier rose to his feet. His Queen beamed down on him from her jewelled throne with looks of mingled love, triumph, and admiration, that burnt into his inmost soul. And as he retreated slowly backwards from the royal presence, he saw the cruel glare of envy and hatred which Bringas and his partisans cast on him. The smiles of the Queen and the scowls of the Ministers were alike full of warning and charged with destiny. If the hatred of the mighty statesman was a menace to his life, the favour of the Sovereign seemed to summon him to mount to a dizzy and perilous height.

Shaken to his soul by a storm of forebodings, amazement, hope, and passion, Nicephorus drew himself free from the throng of flatterers, friends, and rivals ; and wrapping himself in a trooper's cloak, so as not to be recognised, the triumphant General had himself rapidly borne away to his own modest home in a distant quarter of the city. There, tearing off his accoutrements and all insignia of office and rank, he flung himself on his simple couch in solitary seclusion ; and, falling on his knees before a small *ikon* of Mary, he prayed to the Mother of God to guide his steps in the dark wilderness in which he found himself entangled. Transported out of himself far above the vociferous pageants of that exhausting day, Nicephorus gave way, with all the mystical imagination of his Oriental nature, to visions wherein he beheld the Queen of Heaven offering him a place amongst the blessed saints who had forsaken things of the earth for that peace which the world cannot give.

CHAPTER XVI

CÆSAR AT THE RUBICON

All through the night of that eventful day of his triumph the General tossed in a tumult of conflicting emotions, whilst noisy crowds surrounded his own abode with shouts of "Our Ever-Victorious Commander!"—and again, "Nicephorus to the Sacred Palace!"—and even "Nicephorus our Basileus!" He refused to show himself to the people, denied access to all, sent for the monk Athanasius, in order to confess, and had himself clothed in the rough garb of a postulant. He now fully understood the imminent peril to his liberty and his life which the hatred of the ruling faction involved. He felt, with a burning sense of shame, that with all her fascinations, the Empress sought him rather as a tool than as a husband. And he saw before him the whirlpool of revolution, civil war, calumny, and crime that he must face, if he suffered himself to be looked on as an aspirant to the throne. He fell back, with groans and prayers, on his old purpose of seeking rest in a cell, as a simple monk or hermit, as his own uncle had been before him.

At last the faithful Digenes succeeded in forcing his way to the Chief. The whole city, he said, was now in wild excitement, calling for the General to assume the Government and displace the hated Eunuch. Bringas, he said, was well aware of the danger to himself, and was conspiring to arrest and destroy his rival. There was but one course left. To save his own life, to protect his friends, to restore the Empire, the General must grasp the power that all Rome and the army thrust into his hands.

"It cannot be," said Nicephorus calmly; "I am about to retire from this world of blood, struggle, and evil passions. I have sent for the holy man of Mount Athos, who is preparing for my admission to their Order. When my enemies find that I withdraw from the contest, and have no more part in things of earth, they will leave me in peace, and soon forget me. I shall

be forgotten—aye, by those," he added bitterly, "who now profess to care for me. It shall never be said that a Phocas turned rebel to the dynasty of Basil, and plotted to drive an infant Basil from the throne of his fathers, or made himself the tool of a woman's ambition. Go, my son, go and tell them in the city and in the Palace that Nicephorus has now become the hermit, Father Zachariah."

"It is too late," said Digenes, with a groan, "too late to save you from arrest, mutilation—it may be death!"

Here the colloquy was interrupted by a messenger, who brought the General a formal missive from the Sacred Palace that the Council of State craved the immediate presence of the Grand Domestic of the East to confer on urgent affairs of the Empire.

"Tell them," said Nicephorus, with proud contempt, "that I have done with Council, Palace, Empire, politics, and arms. I go to my cell. I leave it to them to save Rome. I will not come."

Digenes withdrew in despair; and now the hermit, Athanasius, was again announced as craving an interview.

"Let him come," said the great soldier, as he flung himself down in abasement beneath the *ikon;* "all will withdraw, and see that no man enter here."

"Holy father, strengthen me in my purpose," groaned the Chief, as the hermit stood behind him, still completely enveloped from head to foot and concealed in an immense black cloak.

Slowly the hood of the mantle was thrown back, and disclosed the pale countenance of Theophano herself. Her eyes flashed with excitement; her features shone with looks of eagerness, entreaty, and love; her voice shook with anxiety, passion, and fear.

"My hero," she broke out spasmodically, "your life is at stake, and I cannot save you from these fiends. They have already set the vermilion seal to an order to have you arrested and deprived of sight. They will seize you if you set foot in the Palace; and our friends there are not strong enough to save you. They will seize you even if you stay here. Rush for sanctuary to the Great Church and claim the protection of the Patriarch. I came here myself at every risk, for I dared not trust a messenger, and—I know well, my hero, my master, my saint," she added in her sweetest voice and with a look of love, "that Nicephorus is a man of iron, who will not be turned from

his purpose even by his best friend." And Theophano put her hand upon his shoulder as he still remained on his knees before the *ikon;* and, passing her soft fingers over his burning brow, she looked down into his eyes.

"Madam," he said slowly, "I am dead to this world. I am dedicated now to God and to Heaven."

"It shall not be," she replied passionately. "If you choose to sacrifice yourself, will you leave the Rome you have saved to the mercy of these wretches, to the savagery of the Infidel? Will you doom to a prison and mutilation my poor children, your true and lawful Sovereigns? Will you abandon me to degradation, to a life of torment, to the worst shame that the Eunuch or the Hagarenes can devise—me who offer you everything that the love of woman and the authority of an Empress of Rome can offer a soldier of the Cross? Nicephorus, son of the hero Bardas, of the noble race of Phocas, can you abandon to shame and ruin the widow of your Sovereign and the children of the house of Basil?"

He sank on the ground before her, and taking the skirt of her robe in his hands he pressed it to his lips with veneration, as if it were the girdle of the Mother of God.

"I go," she murmured, "I dare not stay; they will send their guards here in a few moments. Rush to the church. Claim sanctuary. I bid you in the name of Christ, do this for me—and for mine."

Theophano disappeared as silently and mysteriously as she had come. And now Digenes broke in again with news that the Palace Guard were already on their way to seize the General. He concealed Nicephorus in a military cloak, and forced him into the Church of the Holy Wisdom. Then he rushed to the Patriarch to implore his protection for the fugitive who had taken sanctuary in the most venerated temple of the city. Polyeuctus summoned his whole chapter, and bearing aloft the miraculous crucifix, took Nicephorus under his guardianship. In the meantime Digenes called together the partisans of Nicephorus, and appealed to the people to protect their hero from the vengeance of his rivals. Furious mobs gathered round the cathedral, shouting "Long live the Victorious Chief!" "Death to the Eunuch!" "Nicephorus, our King!" and they offered, by their mass and violence, effective resistance to the guards who attempted to enter the church and arrest the Chief.

Polyeuctus, with his austere virtue and genuine patriotism,

had long desired to put an end to the corrupt and savage reign of the powerful Eunuch; and he flung himself into the defence of Nicephorus with all the energy of his fiery and generous nature. He vehemently denounced his purpose of retiring to a cell, refused him absolution, and menaced him with excommunication and every spiritual penalty, unless he continued to do his duty to the State. Dragging the General with him, girdled by a crowd of priests, bearing sacred images and relics, in the midst of an immense mob of citizens cheering the hero of the day, the Patriarch forced Nicephorus into the Senate which had been already convoked by the Regent's will.

There Polyeuctus, with the General standing beside him, poured out an impassioned appeal, of which this is the substance:—He gave a moving picture of the decay of the Empire and the ravages of the Infidel by sea and land until the invincible arm of Nicephorus had driven them back to the Far East. He spoke of the orgies of the late reign, and of the corruptions that had eaten into the heart of the Government. The Prime Minister, who had suffered—nay, encouraged—all this corruption, he said, now claimed to be undisputed master of the Empire, and was affecting to be the real Augustus in the name of an inexperienced woman and her two babes. "Let us close this era of corruption and fraud," he continued, "by giving absolute power to the hero who has twice saved our name and faith from its deadly foes—this stern and pious soldier who is feared as much for his honesty by the evil crew of the Palace minions, as he is feared for his invincible prowess by the Hagarenes of Abd-el-Aziz or of the accursed Chamdas, the enemy of Christ. Senators, magnates, and officials of Rome, there is but one man who can restore this Empire and confront its secret enemies at home as well as its open foes abroad. Let us confer, as our forefathers of Rome would do of old, dictatorial power on the one man who is worthy to wield it."

This fervid and bold appeal was received with cheers by a majority of the Senate, but the party of Bringas met it with furious opposition. Amidst the storm of conflicting voices Nicephorus himself came forward to protest that he would accept no office or task which in any way trenched on the rights and prerogatives of the Regent, or menaced the succession to the throne of their lawful Sovereigns, the infant Basileis. With his hand on the holy relics, which the deacons had carried before the Patriarch into the Senate House, Nicephorus swore,

in presence of the entire Senate, the priests, and Ministers assembled, that he prayed God to strike him down with the foulest form of death and to consign his soul to eternal damnation, if he ever should break his faith as a loyal subject of the Regent and the two Augusti. On their side the Senate, by its chief officials, swore to maintain in his office the Grand Domestic of the East; to suffer no act of State, no appointment to office, and no dismissal from office to be made without his sanction and advice.

Nicephorus was saved. So far as words and oaths could go —and they did not go far in the city "that God protects"—he was practically invested with despotic powers. But in face of the savage enmity of Bringas and his party, and without any adequate body of troops devoted to him, the General knew how precarious was his life in the capital. He hurriedly withdrew and hastened to his head-quarters in Cappadocia, where his friends gave out that he was busy organising his army for a fresh expedition into the East. The struggle between Theophano and the Eunuch was carried on by both sides with desperate energy and unscrupulous arts. The Regent now took into her favour Digenes, the Akritas, as a trusty partisan of Nicephorus, and had even sanctioned his marriage with the Princess Agatha. Theophano saw the advantage of gathering to her faction the relations of her late husband, whose legal successor she claimed to be. She restored to their rank and liberty the sisters of Romanus, now aunts of the Basileis *de jure;* and ranged round her all the friends of the chivalrous Akritas and all the partisans of the Princesses of the Basilian dynasty. On his side, the astute Lord Chamberlain was straining every nerve to find rivals to Nicephorus, who might act as a counterpoise. He was even suspected by the Regent of looking to the deposed family of Lecapenus, the late Emperor, for a possible pretender to the throne.

After the revolution which had driven out the sons of Romanus Lecapenus and restored to his legal rights Constantine Born-in-the-Purple, Stephanus Lecapenus had been a State prisoner for nearly twenty years in strict seclusion. He was now kept under rigid surveillance in the island of Lesbos. In the church of Methymna he was suffered to attend the solemn mass on the eve of Easter Sunday. He was led to the altar and there was offered the consecrated elements by the archpriest officiating. As he drank the cup he was seen to stagger

and fall, and before the rite was concluded he lay a corpse in the church. The report of his death was a three days' wonder at Byzantium, and a fruitful occasion for suspicion, recrimination, and gossip. But the sudden death of royal prisoners, deposed Sovereigns, and possible pretenders was too common an incident in such times to cause any serious commotion. The faction of the Regent accused the Eunuch of the murder. The faction of Bringas laid it at the door of the Regent. Its only effect was to make both more suspicious of the other side as well as more desperate in their own schemes.

Nicephorus was now working night and day at the reorganisation and equipment of his veteran army. His ulterior plans were undecided; but he saw that, both for his own life and freedom, as well as for the defence of the Empire, his command of an army, perfect in discipline and ready for instant action, was an indispensable condition. Whether he was to crush the Saracen for ever, whether he was to save his own life, he must be at the head of troops devoted to himself and perfectly ready to fight. Michael, a secret emissary of the Regent, had just left his tent with an urgent appeal from Theophano to hasten back to the capital with a powerful army, in order to save her and her children from the machinations of Bringas. Thrusting aside his maps, plans, and the reports of his officers, Nicephorus brooded over the tremendous issues at stake—equally full of peril whether he advanced or drew back.

Hour after hour the General meditated, torn in opposite ways by love and doubt, by eagerness to obey his enchantress, and by horror at the sin of plunging the Empire in civil war. In despair, he flung himself down with groans on his couch. Suddenly, there burst into his tent John Tzimisces, in a state of wild excitement which made him defy all the courtesies of life. "What! are you sleeping, General," the impetuous soldier broke forth—"asleep when that wretched Eunuch is plotting your death? Up! or it will be too late! there is not an hour to lose! March, or enter the prison in which Bringas has ordered us to fling you!"

"Prison!—what prison?" said Nicephorus, stupefied by the violence of the furious Joannes.

"Read this," said John; "and a similar offer is made to General Courcouas!"

The letter was a long and formal document signed by Joseph Bringas in the name of the Council of State, over which he

presided, detailing the facts of the vast conspiracy that they had discovered in Byzantium to do away with the infant Basileis, and to place the popular General on the throne of Basil. This plot, it was added, was directed by Nicephorus in person, whilst pretending to march against the Saracen, and his agents and partisans had already been arrested and put to torture. His father Bardas was in prison, and his brother Leo was about to be arrested. The arrest and punishment of so notorious a rebel was the duty of every loyal officer of the Empire. And the Council charged the Lord General Joannes, strategus of the Anatolian Theme, and the Lord General Courcouas, strategus of the Cappadocian Theme, to put away this public enemy by all and every means in their power. When they had fulfilled this service, John should be duly appointed Marshal of the armies of the East, in place of the traitor, and Courcouas should have supreme command of the armies of the West. "Seize him, and force on him the tonsure he pretends he desires, and immure him in a frontier monastery for life: or send him in chains to us at Byzantium—we shall know how to deal with him." And the letter to Tzimisces was inscribed within—"To the Lord Marshal of the East—hereafter to be named Basileus of the Romans."

And here General Courcouas burst in with the second letter to the same effect. He was as much excited as Tzimisces himself, and equally enraged at the treachery of Bringas.

"What can we do?" said Nicephorus gloomily. "They hold the official authority of the Palace: to wrest it from them means rebellion, anarchy, and civil war."

"What can we do?" roared Tzimisces, aflame with passion; "what! shall chiefs such as we are, at the head of the finest army in the world, suffer ourselves to be the slaves of a vile Eunuch, a miserable Paphlagonian? Are we going to be crushed by the infamous tricks of the Palace hareem? There is not an hour to lose, I say. Advance or perish!—Put the Imperial diadem on your brow and march for Constantinople this very day!"

So, too, said Courcouas, with furious gestures. And, beside themselves with rage, the two Generals drew their swords and pointed them at the bare breast of Nicephorus.

"March!" they shouted, "or take this sword and die as a Roman general should die rather than be made a captive and a slave!"

In the midst of this madness the officers of the staff burst in, with a wild insubordinate crowd of troopers, for John had already communicated to his own following the infamous proposals sent by the Eunuch. The news flew round the camp and excited an uproar. John, Courcouas, and their comrades seized Nicephorus as he was, and dragged him to the exercising plain, where already the troops had been hastily called to arms. They mounted their Commander on a shield, and carried him round the squadrons and battalions with a roar of cries: "Ever-Victorious Nicephorus!" "Autocrat of the Romans!" "All-powerful Basileus!" "Long life to Augustus, our Sovereign Lord!" "Long may he reign!" "God protect our invincible Emperor!" And this was followed by a roar as loud and as spontaneous from ten thousand throats at once, as spears and swords glistened in the sunlight, and the eagles were shaken in the air—"To Rome, to Rome, to the city of the Cæsars!"

Nicephorus, indeed, had crossed his Rubicon.

CHAPTER XVII

THE NEW BASILEUS

It was a glorious morning of summer, and the sun had just risen over the crests of the range of Anti-Taurus, when the most brilliant army of that warlike age was drawn up on the plain of Cæsarea for the installation of the new Emperor. Nicephorus advanced to the tribune, surrounded by the counts, strategi, and captains of his Eastern force. He had suffered them to place on his feet the vermilion buskins clasped with their golden eagles—the sign of majesty—but he resolutely refused to accept the diadem and the purple mantle they sought to force on him. Then he commanded silence, and, with that voice like a trumpet that had so often rung along their ranks, he spoke thus :—

"Comrades, it is with no desire to be a tyrant that I have taken up these Imperial trappings ; it has been forced upon me by your summons and the will of the army. You are my witnesses how unwillingly I assume the task of preserving this our realm of Rome, and, indeed, my own life. Almighty God above knows that I am ready to give my life for you, and no suffering or danger can turn me from my purpose. You have resolved that I shall not be crushed by the insolent devices of that upstart Eunuch, who presumes to play the despot over all. He holds my venerable father, Bardas, in his prisons ; he is hunting to death my brother Leo, and my friends ; he has sent orders to our gallant generals here to send me in chains to the capital, there to be blinded or murdered. I am going, not in chains, but at the head of my brave soldiers, to wrest the power of the Empire from the cruel hands of this usurper, to rescue my father and my brother from his clutches, to restore the Government to its lawful Princes. You know how I love you, my children, and will stand by you till death. Rise, and put your hearts into the fight. There is stern work for us to do. I cannot tell you that it can be done without shedding of your

blood. I am leading you this day, not against Cretans, or Scythians, or Arabs, whom you have so often beaten, but against Romans. We have to capture not a hill-fort, but that great city of the Cæsars on the Golden Horn, which has walls and towers, garrisons, riches, stores, and splendour such as no other city on earth can show. God is with me, for my cause is just. I go not to dethrone our young Sovereigns, but to be their guardian and to secure their throne. It is not I that break my oath. It is the perjured villain who breaks faith with me, and is plotting to kill me and mine. I have led you to glory in many a fight of old. Follow me now to Rome, where a nobler triumph awaits us, the cause of justice and of God above!"

These words roused a frenzy of excitement in the troops, who replied with shouts of applause, with the brandishing of their lances, and the crash of arms. Their beloved General, like the great Ironside he was, would mingle appeals to battle and to God in the same speech, for he well knew his Armenian and Anatolian veterans to be as keen for fight as they were God-fearing in heart. "These words of his," says Leo the Deacon in his Chronicle, "stirred the army to an indescribable state of excitement, making them eager for the most desperate adventure. The soldiers adored him frantically and gloried to serve under him. Bred to war from his youth upwards, he not only was the bravest of the brave in battle and endowed with marvellous personal dexterity in arms, but he had that genius for inspiring men with his own zeal that no one of that age could be compared with him as Commander-in-Chief."

That very day the great march to the Bosphorus began. Exercising at once the rights of Emperor, Nicephorus, with politic generosity, conferred on Tzimisces and on Courcouas the very dignities with which the Eunuch had proposed to purchase their treason. John was promoted to be Magistros, and Grand Domestic of the Eastern armies, and he was placed in command of the Asiatic frontier to hold in check the Saracens of Syria. From head-quarters there issued a stream of Imperial dispatches, nominations to command, orders to march and official requisitions. Every high-road and every dominant post was occupied with adequate detachments. The passes, the fortresses, and the ports were all taken over by trusty officers of the new Sovereign. The army was mobilised and concentrated, and was hurled in columns by forced marches upon the shores of the Propontis.

The whole of the Asiatic Themes being thus in secure posses-

sion of the new Sovereign, and the seaboard closed against any carrying of intelligence, Bishop Philotheus was sent in advance with Imperial missives addressed to the Patriarch at Constantinople, to the Senate, and to the Great Chamberlain at the Palace. The dispatch to the latter was thus worded:—

"You will prepare to receive me, Nicephorus Phocas, your Sovereign, now duly invested with Imperial authority. My care will be to watch over the infant sons of our late Sovereign, Romanus, and to protect them as their guardian until they come of age. I shall devote myself to the service of the State, and I undertake to increase the power of the Roman Empire by deeds of arms. They who resist my will must take the consequences of their folly, for this issue must be fought out to the death. Their blood will be upon their own heads if they choose the wrong in place of the right."

So skilful had been the dispositions of the new Autocrat, and so perfect was the discipline of the Asian Government, that, according to the Chronicle, no rumour of the resolution that had taken place at Cæsarea reached the capital until the bishop presented his dispatch to Bringas in council. The Eunuch, beside himself with rage, stormed at the venerable prelate as if he had been a rude messenger from some barbarous frontier chief. He flung the poor bishop into prison, proclaimed Nicephorus a rebel and an outlaw, and prepared for a desperate defence.

Bringas was not the man to yield without a stout fight. As his overtures to John and to Courcouas had failed, he turned to leading nobles and captains in the West, whom he inspired with jealousy of Nicephorus. He sent for Marianos Apambas, once commander of the Imperial forces in Italy, to whom he committed the defence of the city. He secured also Paschal, a former strategus, and Nicholas and Leo of the noble house of the Tornicii. The vast ramparts of the city, with their three hundred towers, were made ready for assault, the city gates were barred, and a boom was cast across the Golden Horn. The Imperial Guard was called under arms, and contingents brought in from Macedonia and Thrace, who were known to be always jealous of the Eastern divisions. Bringas got a sentence of excommunication against Nicephorus; he obtained an Imperial order in the names of the infant Basileis declaring the family of Phocas and his partisans as outlaws.

The Empress, meantime, shut herself close in her own wing

of the Palace, guarded by the most powerful force she could muster to her defence. There the Princess Agatha rushed into her room in a state of acute agony with the news that the party of Bringas had drawn up an order for the arrest of Basil Digenes, the Akritas, whom it was intended to mutilate or murder. "Find some way to save him," she cried in despair, "for we owe him this service. With his heroic spirit, he neglected all the warnings of his friends to escape in time. He thought he could still aid the cause of his Chief by watching his interests here—and I fear that he lingered still for my sake—though I pressed him to think of the danger he incurred. Save him, Augusta, save the truest friend to the General and the noblest soldier of Rome. He may be killed or blinded before an hour is passed."

"Where is he now?" asked Theophano; "I was assured he had made his escape into Asia to the army."

"But he came back secretly and managed to reach the apartments of my sister and myself—in order," she added, with a blush, "to induce me to fix a day for our marriage, if he lived through the turmoil of these times. We have concealed him for the moment, but we cannot protect him long."

"He shall be put in charge of our own Cubiculars of the Royal Chamber, and he shall be enrolled under another name in the corps of Palace Guards whom I have mustered for defence of myself and my children. We will not be beaten without a sharp fight."

The news now ran through the great city that Nicephorus, with the vanguard of his army, had reached the shores opposite. He was actually in possession of Chrysopolis, the modern Scutari, and his ensigns could be seen in the summer palace of Hieria, on the shore that now faces Seraglio Point. The excitement in the city grew intense. Vast crowds filled the streets day and night, restrained only by the Macedonian troops, whom Bringas had posted throughout the city, which was declared to be in a state of siege. The passions of the multitude rose to fever pitch when it was discovered that the astute Eunuch had taken care to have all ships, barges, and every kind of craft removed from the Asiatic coast, and that no means as yet existed by which Nicephorus and his forces could cross the straits. At dawn it was found that the venerable Bardas, the father of Nicephorus, had escaped from his prison and had sought sanctuary in the cathedral, where the Patriarch had

taken him under his protection. The guards of Bringas were sent to drag the veteran out of the church; but angry crowds with arms, stones, and staves drove back the troops, who sought to force their way into the temple and to seize their prisoner.

It was now the morning of Sunday, 9th August, and vast crowds filled the Church of the Holy Wisdom, where the service of the day had begun. Bringas, puffed up with overweening pride in his own authority and confident in his military strength, rode down in person from the Palace, and with a body of his guards tried to force his way to the very choir. He harangued the people with daring insolence, and threatened them with his vengeance and an embargo on corn. This roused the citizens to fury, and Bringas and his men were driven out with insults and missiles. He made his way back to the Palace, with magnificent audacity still defying the mob, and even ordering the corn market to be closed, and no bread to be sold or issued. But finding that Theophano and the royal Princesses were strongly guarded and barricaded in a large part of the vast edifice, where Basil Digenes had assumed the chief command, he felt himself no longer safe there, and shut himself up with his guards in his own palace.

The city thereon broke out into revolution; and for three days and nights desperate street fights ensued between the bands of citizens who sided with Nicephorus and the Macedonian guards who remained loyal to Bringas. By degrees armed detachments of Nicephorus' partisans made their way into the city, and some bands managed to cross the Bosphorus. Polyeuctus, with his clergy and masses of citizens, bore the aged Bardas in triumph to the Imperial Palace, and there installed him in a strong position of defence. In one of the desperate street fights which raged throughout the city, a woman threw a heavy vase from a top window, which clove the skull of Apambas, the Commander of the Macedonians. His death demoralised the last defenders of the Eunuch. The mob now stormed his palace, sacked, and burnt it: and the defeated tyrant, in turn, fled for sanctuary to the Great Church which his intended victim had so recently left. His partisans were hunted by the populace, and thrown into prison. The streets of the capital ran with blood. For three days and nights massacre, pillage, arson raged unchecked through the mighty city "protected of God." Nicephorus, with his officers and troops, on the Asian coast, without vessels to cross the straits,

watched from afar the tumult which they were powerless to quell.

The party of the new Basileus at last found a leader. Basil, natural son of the former Emperor or usurper, Romanus Lecapenus, by a Russian slave of the hareem, had long been in high office under Constantine. He was created a patrician in that reign, captain of the guard, president of the Senate, Grand Chamberlain, and General in the war against the Saracens. He had been prepared in childhood for high office short of Empire by the barbarous rite of emasculation, which was regarded as a grotesque form of lay tonsure.[1] But he had wonderful energy, courage, and sagacity—a born statesman. Before the accession of Romanus he had been displaced by his rival Bringas, disgraced, deprived of office and rank, and consigned to obscurity and strict surveillance. He naturally hated the Eunuch, who had overthrown him. And his hour of retaliation had come. Arming his own household, his slaves, and followers, to the number of three thousand, he patrolled the city in force, beating down the remnants of the Bringas faction, proclaiming the new Emperor, and restoring a regular police in the devastated city.

Thence he led his men to the Golden Horn, seized the ships in port, and dispatched them across the straits to transport the army of the new Sovereign. The Imperial fleet, barges, vessels of all kinds, and open boats, carried over crowds of citizens, who flocked to hail the rising Sun of Empire with shouts of "Long live our glorious and Ever-Victorious Nicephorus." On Sunday, 16th August, exactly a week from the outbreak of the revolution, the new Emperor was escorted by the new Grand Chamberlain and a swarm of functionaries to the capital to be crowned. The Imperial galley, gilt from stem to stern, dressed with silken banners and awnings, had a deck bridge adorned with figures and emblems and an image of Saint George at the prow. There sat on his throne the new Chief, as his oarsmen, with gilded sweeps, slowly rowed the State vessel beneath the city walls round to the suburb of Hebdomon, south of the mighty ramparts. Thence through the Golden Gate, the Autocrat, in golden armour, rode in procession to the Church of

[1] Such persons, even if they were of royal blood, could be entrusted with the highest office and power, without risk of their aspiring to the throne, from which by law and custom they were cut off as disqualified. Throughout the whole history of the Byzantine Empire, as of the Sultanate, they often rose to almost despotic power.

the Holy Wisdom. He sat a white charger, caparisoned with housings of purple, gold, and jewels. The long route of many miles in extent, thronged with vast crowds cheering the new Sovereign, was adorned with wreaths, banners, and triumphal arches. At various points on the course, the Emperor dismounted to prostrate himself in many a venerated church before some miraculous image, and placed lighted tapers in sign of adoration. At other spots he had to be disarmed from his military accoutrements and invested with the Imperial *scaramangion*, or mantle of ermine and rare furs. His sword was then laid aside, and the sceptre, surmounted with the cross, was placed in his right hand. At the Golden Gate the Saracen prisoners fell into the *cortège*, and the Factions met him with their eternal chants of "Hail, Victorious Chief!" "Nicephorus, King of the Romans!"

It would be tedious to narrate in detail the interminable ceremonies of that long day of triumph and consecration. It was all carried out minutely, according to the *Book of Ceremonies*, in the solemn and sacramental forms that had been used at the installation of Romanus four years before, forms that had been used in the city of the Constantines for some five centuries already, that were destined to be used there for some five centuries more. These secular rites have been servilely imitated and adapted by all the monarchies of the West and of the North for a thousand years since. It was the same elaborate consecration of a king by the high priests of the State Church, of which we lately witnessed the revival in an age which claims to have outgrown Byzantine servility, superstition, and gaudy display.

In those days kings and their people attached a mystical importance to the sacramental character of those acts of consecration. And the new Basileus was himself a mystic amongst mystics. Accordingly, Nicephorus duly prostrated himself before the Miracle-working Image of the Mother of God; the tapers were duly lighted; the incense ascended from the altars; the royal vestments were duly exchanged for the Imperial tunic. The diadem was bound round the grizzled head of the new Sovereign; the military greaves were then solemnly changed for the vermilion buskins. And thus on foot the Emperor entered the porch of the Holy Wisdom, where he was met by the Patriarch and all his Chapter. The true Cross, which Saint Helena had recovered, and which, ultimately, at the fourth

crusade, passed to Saint Louis in Paris, was solemnly borne before the monarch amidst the adoration of the worshippers around. Again and again the royal vestments were changed, after being first solemnly blessed by the Patriarch. Then the Emperor was conducted by the priests to the *ambon*, where the prayers and offices of consecration were said, and the holy oil of anointing was poured on the royal person: and at last the Imperial crown was solemnly placed on the veteran's brow amidst chants of "Holy, Holy, Holy! Glory to God in the highest! Peace to men on earth!"

But the very enumeration of the endless stages in the rite becomes intolerable. Nor can modern patience endure the recital of the perpetual acts of reverence, homage, symbolic gestures: of the processions, feastings, and gala courtesies of that prodigious ceremonial. Hour after hour the chants went on with a rhythm that combined Oriental prostration to a despot with Christian litanies of adoration—"Hail, Nicephorus, Autocrat of the Romans," "Hail, mighty Sovereign of the Romans," "Hail, thou who hast put to flight our enemies," "Hail, thou who hast destroyed the cities of the foe," "Thou hast thrust Ishmael into the dust," "God hast shown pity on His people, in that He has placed thee on the Imperial throne," "Rejoice, thou city of the Romans," "Receive him whom God has crowned," "The people desire Nicephorus to be their King," "The law requires him to reign," "The Palace asks for him to rule," "The Senate calls for him," "The army cries out for him," "The whole world craves for Nicephorus to be its Sovereign Lord." "Hear us, O God, when we call to Thee," "Hear us, O God, and grant long life to our King." "Give him long life, O Christ," "God preserve him," "Long may he reign," "May God keep this Christian realm in His holy keeping."

Such were the chants and litanies which hour after hour rang through the domes of the Holy Wisdom, rang through the streets and porticoes of the vast city. They were chants which, in a few short years, were turned into execrations and comminations. But they are the very words which for a thousand years the peoples of Europe have shouted to high Heaven on the day when they have to welcome a new master and ask the blessing of God upon his reign.

When the portentous ceremonial in the Church of the Holy Wisdom was completed, the Imperial procession was formed

again, led by a bodyguard consisting of one hundred Varangian halberdiers, and one hundred young nobles. The Sovereign was escorted to the hall of the throne, where the homage or "adoration," as it was called, was duly performed. The chief dignitaries of the Empire prostrated themselves at the feet of the new Lord. An endless stream of courtiers followed, in their ranks, as marshalled by the masters of the ceremonies. At last Nicephorus was carried back to the Sacred Palace—now "Autocrat of the Romans, the equal of the apostles, successor of the pious Constantine, of him who had founded the city and endowed the Church, the vicegerent of Providence on earth." There he was joined by the Empress, radiant and triumphant, who received him with a smile that, to him, was of more value than the blessings of a thousand priests and the cheers of a hundred thousand citizens, a smile which promised him a crown more precious than all the glories and the powers which the Empire of the world had to give.

CHAPTER XVIII

EMPEROR AND PATRIARCH

The first act of the new Emperor was to hold a Council, at which he made a series of appointments to fill the offices of the Empire. He dispensed with the elaborate code of etiquette, which for centuries had surrounded every act of the Augustus. He took his seat at the Council Board as if he were still General holding a council of war amongst his officers rather than as a ceremonial successor of Justinian and Theophilus. He did not fill up the appointment of Parakeimomenos, or Grand Chamberlain, the office which had made Bringas the real master of the Empire; but he created Basil, son of Lecapenus, President of the Senate, and practically invested him with chief power. Bardas, his venerable father, whose life had been saved in the revolution, was now created Cæsar, a title revived from an earlier age of the Roman Empire. John Tzimisces was confirmed in his office of Domestic, or Grand Marshal of the East. Leo, the brother, was created a Magistros and Curopalates, or Grand Marshal of the Palace, *i.e.* practically Commander of the Imperial Bodyguard. Bringas was deported to a distant monastery in Asia, where he lived in obscurity for years; but he was not otherwise punished, and was not confined in an actual prison.

Nicephorus then ordered his own household. He refused to use the Sacred *Koitôn*, or bedchamber of the Emperors. He had his camp bed placed in a small and simple cabinet adjoining his private office. He bore in public the Imperial robes; but beneath them he had the hair-shirt of a penitent. Ever since the tragic death of one as dear to him as life, he had sworn off the use of meat and of wine. His private table was still served as before with the food and drink of a hermit: for he felt himself in his own eyes a monk upon the throne, a humble follower of St. Theodore, one of the soldier-martyrs of the faith. On the

first day of his reign he had admitted to audience the prelate Antony, Syncellus (or abbot) of the great monastery of St. George of the Stoudion, who came in the name of the Patriarch and of the Chapter of the Holy Wisdom.

"Most august Basileus," he said, after the formal compliments and statement of his mission, "the venerable Patriarch, the Abbot Athanasius of Mount Athos, and myself of the Stoudion, have earnestly, but faithfully in our duty to God, resisted your desire to enter our ranks as a monk, for we hold that the safety of this realm requires you to act as its commander in war and as its ruler in peace. The duties of a monk are one: the duties of a Sovereign are other. It is impossible to be both monk and king. This Palace has been for ages the scene of royal festivities and pomps. The citizens will not endure to be deprived of such holidays and shows; and government of the realm could not be carried on if these things were suddenly suppressed. We churchmen are the first to honour the pious purpose of your Majesty to show an example of temperance, chastity, and godliness in halls which have long been the scene of frivolity and vice. But the austerities of a hermit do not become a king, and are prone to be a subject of mockery and malice. It is ill wearing a hair-shirt beneath the mantle of a Basileus in the Golden Throne room. And it is in vain to eat dry bread and drink plain water at a State banquet in the Hall of the Nineteen Couches. Eat, live, sleep with temperance—not with austerity: as a soldier, not as a monk. This magnificent Palace has for centuries been the Court of an Augusta, as well as of an Augustus. It is to be feared that scandals may arise if it be given up entirely to men, to courtiers, to soldiers, and their followers and lackeys."

"Dost thou, indeed, counsel me, holy father, to take to myself the late Regent?" asked Nicephorus, with an eagerness that was almost fierce.

"God forbid!" replied the monk sternly. "She it is whom we fear. It is but five months since she became a widow. And did not her widowhood now forbid such an alliance, her youth and her career make it impious to harbour such a thought. Most august Sovereign, we have not offered to your Majesty a suggestion so unworthy of your inviolable name."

"What, then, is your meaning, my father?" asked the Basileus sternly.

"That the ex-Empress, the widow of the late Basileus, must

cease to reside in the Palace of the unwedded Emperor, to whom she is not wife, nor sister, nor kinswoman."

"And if I choose that she shall remain—being mother to the infant Basileis," asked Nicephorus proudly, "who will say me nay?"

"The people, who will say that their hero has taken to himself not a queen, but a mistress. The nobles, who will hold that Nicephorus rebelled against his lawful Sovereign in order to lie with his wife. And the Church, which will forbid you the holy things as one who sets an example of evil living on the throne of Rome."

And with that the monk left the presence of the Sovereign, who stifled his rage, perplexity, and bitterness.

Nicephorus controlled himself sufficiently to commission the monk to repeat the decision of the Church to Theophano in person. He did not dare to brave the chance of such a scandal. Nor did it suit Theophano to risk such an issue. She formally withdrew from the Sacred Palace with all her retinue and officials, and was duly installed in the monastery of Petrion, at the upper end of the Golden Horn, in the quarter now known as that of the Phanar, which was almost a suburb of the capital.

Her widowhood and seclusion did not last long. There had been a passionate scene when the monk had insisted on her leaving the Palace, and Theophano rushed to Nicephorus and plied him with tears, blandishments, and entreaties. She fell on his neck and abjured him not to consign her to a life in the cloister. She had saved his life, she had placed him on the throne, she had loved him for years. Her dying husband, she swore, had named his beloved General to be his successor on his throne and in his bed, and to be the guardian of his infant children. As a stranger to the family of Basil, Nicephorus would be tempted and even counselled to put the children away. As their step-father, and husband of their mother, he would be their natural guardian. Finally, in a torrent of tears and passionate appeals, she refused to quit the Palace unless Nicephorus swore that he would make her his wife at the earliest time that was possible.

The earliest time came very soon; and the Patriarch, however loath, was obliged to perform the ceremony in person. The customary rites were gone through, but somewhat abridged—first, by the dislike of Nicephorus for all forms of display, and then by the fact that Theophano had already been crowned as

Augusta, and was only to be formally restored to the high place she had occupied so brilliantly for years. But the litanies and the chants, the blessings of the vestments, the homage of the lords and ladies of the Court were by no means curtailed. When the ceremony was complete, Nicephorus advanced as of right and custom to the *bema*, and was about to pass through the *Iconostasis*, or screen, to prostrate himself before the high altar within the chancel. Such was the right of the Emperor alone of laymen—a right which no man could value more profoundly than the Imperial hermit himself.

As the Emperor attempted to enter within the Holy of Holies there confronted him the Patriarch, Polyeuctus, with all his clergy, clad in vestments of high office and bearing the sacred emblems of their worship. The venerable Patriarch boldly thrust back his Sovereign and barred his progress within. Stretching out his right arm in a voice that rang through the domes of the gorgeous church crowded with courtiers and officials, Polyeuctus cried: "Basileus, whom God has crowned, thou shalt not come within this holy place. If thou dost force a way to the altar, thou wilt incur the greater excommunication from all sacred things. Thou knowest well the canon which imposes a year of penance upon those who enter into a second marriage. To that state of penance thou hast condemned thyself by the act of to-day in marrying the widow of our late King. Not till a year and a day have passed can I suffer thee to enter here or to touch with thy lips the altar of Christ!"

A profound silence fell on the crowded church, as the courtiers heard the prelate defy the Sovereign in the hour of his pride and glory. Amazement, awe, wrath, stirred the assembly. For a full minute the Basileus glared at the priest, who had dared to inflict on him a rebuff such as the proud soldier had never in his whole life had to endure. For a short space Nicephorus was speechless. But with a great effort he smothered his wrath and concealed his astonishment. "Priest," he said firmly, as he stood his ground, "the King, chosen by the Romans and crowned by God, has the right by virtue of his office to approach the altar. Stand back, I charge thee, ere I order thy arrest as a traitor."

"Basileus," replied the Patriarch, with a shrill but clear voice, as his meagre form seemed to be lighted up with a divine fire within, "there is no King within this holy place but God, whose servant and messenger I am. Advance one step nearer

to God's holy altar, and I pronounce against thee full sentence of excommunication from all rites of the Church."

The congregation stood aghast: struck dumb, as courtier faced priest, soldier confronted monk—as loyalty to the hero-king struggled against profound veneration of the sacred rites. But in that age, and with a ruler so deeply imbued with that reverence in its severest form, the issue could not be doubtful. The Emperor mastered his passion and submitted with majestic self-control. He slowly took his way back to the Palace with a bitterness in his soul that had made him a new man.

Whilst this was going on in the church, Theophano was holding a high court to receive the homage of the ladies of rank. Seated on a golden throne, attended by her eunuchs and dames of honour, the Empress was robed in Imperial garments of silk damask in diaper pattern, adorned with pearls and rubies. On her head was the diadem with the triple rows of pearl pendants; in her hand a jewelled sceptre. Nicephorus sought to assuage the fire that consumed him with the sight of the radiant happiness of his Queen; nor would he suffer her day of glory to be clouded by any report of the affront that had been inflicted on himself. With a bitter heart and a gnawing sense of all the humiliations and sacrifices to which his love was too certain to expose him, he suffered himself to be taken through all the ceremonies of the occasion, and the day was ended by a gorgeous banquet of two hundred and forty guests in the famous *Triclinion*, or Hall of the Nineteen Couches. There Augustus and Augusta sat in state beneath the mosaic dome that covered the *Accubiton*, or raised daïs of state. Even there Nicephorus had ordered them to serve him his accustomed supper of oatmeal cake, lentils, and herbs. "Taste this, if you love me," whispered Theophano, bending to her husband with a look that pierced his senses to the very bone; and she pressed on him a rich dish of savoury meat. "Pledge me in a cup of Chian wine, on this day of our wedlock," she whispered again, as the golden goblet was handed by the Imperial cup-bearer. "In token of our love," she murmured. That night Nicephorus ate flesh and drank wine, neither of which had he tasted for many a long year. It was the first step of a new life, the prelude to many another thing. That night he violated all his oaths, and he knew it; for in spite of himself he heard the words ringing in his ears: "The woman gave me to eat, and I did eat."

The woman gave him many more things of which he had small desire and no experience. Theophano insisted on having the new reign inaugurated with an endless succession of festivals, games, shows, gifts, and Court ceremonials. Basil the Prime Minister and Leo the Curopalates pressed on the Emperor in council the need of gratifying the people and nobles by brilliant displays, in order to allay the irritation already arising from the rigid economy in the finances of the Empire. On this Nicephorus had insisted, with a view to maintaining the vast drain of his Eastern army. He toiled day and night with his military staff and his expert officials in organising the armies of East and West, and in restoring the fleets and arsenals of the Mediterranean, whilst he suffered the Empress and the State functionaries to arrange a series of public festivities.

Day after day the Hippodrome was the scene of shows, each surpassing the last in novelty and splendour. The familiar and furious chariot-races were followed by marvellous displays of acrobats, wrestlers, jugglers, and dancers from India, Nubia, Arabia, or Syria, clad in many-coloured robes of Oriental fantasy, with lithe contortionists, rope-dancers, pole-climbers, and various exotic performances which held the people spell-bound. Then would be produced displays of horsemanship, first by Cossacks and then by Bedaweens, feats of polo, archery, and the Arab game of jerid. Next advanced troops of Russian mimes in shaggy furs, drawn in on native sleighs, with characteristic sham fights and uncouth weapons. On another day wild beasts from Asia or Africa were shown to the wondering populace—Bactrian camels, leopards held by chains, giraffes, gazelles, zebras, and even an elephant, a rhinoceros, and a crocodile. At all these shows the new Basileus was forced to preside in state, in costume of ceremony, and seated aloft in the *cathisma*, whence he solemnly waved his blessing to the people, gave the signal for the race to begin, or awarded the prizes to the charioteers amidst the everlasting shouts of the Factions: "God bless and give long life to our august Basileus."

The religious ceremonies were assuredly not forgotten; and these Nicephorus performed with far greater willingness and interest. In solemn procession, attended by his Palace officers and escorted by bands of priests, choristers, and acolytes, the Basileus visited the great temples of the city, mounted on his milk-white charger in gorgeous caparison of state, riding side

by side with the Patriarch, mounted on his less martial mule—symbol of the union of State and Church. He made pilgrimage in turn to the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom, to the Church of the Apostles, the old burial-place of the Emperors, to such famous convents as the Stoudion, or the *Pege*, or to the venerated shrines having pictures "not made with hands," and images that were accounted to effect miraculous cures. Or, again, he performed, with a faith that his predecessors had too often lacked, some antique function of the Imperial ritual—at the season of the birth of Christ, or that of the Crucifixion, or such as the ceremonial bath in the holy water of Blachernæ at the north-western extremity of the capital. But no ceremony, no care of State, no toil of his office could turn Nicephorus from the Theophano whom he had won for his own by such sacrifices and so many desperate struggles. He lavished on her all she asked—jewels, tapestries, palaces, villas, and domains—Imperial splendour, and boundless wealth.

The influence of the Empress over her husband, and the change of life that was visible in Nicephorus, who from an armed anchorite seemed to be fast adopting the habits of a Byzantine autocrat, caused much searching of heart in the venerable Patriarch. On her side Theophano could never forget, nor suffer her husband to forgive, the deadly stigma which the Church had inflicted on her second marriage.

Polyeuctus and the Basilissa were now open enemies. But a more terrible struggle was at hand. The marriage festivities were still in progress when the Court chaplain, Stylianos, hurried to Polyeuctus to inform him that Nicephorus had acted as god-father at the private baptism of the infant son of Romanus and Theophano, at which the chaplain had officiated. The Patriarch bounded with exultation. "It is within the prohibited degrees," said the fanatic monk, "for the god-father to marry the mother of his child-in-God." "It is incestuous by the canon of our Sixth Council, held in the time of Constantine V.," said the Patriarch. Polyeuctus hastened to the Palace and insisted on an immediate audience with the Basileus. Once admitted, he bearded the King with all the passion of his fanatical faith.

"It is my solemn duty to inform your Majesty that Holy Church declares to be incestuous the marriage you have attempted to contract with the mother of your child-in-God, the infant Basileus, Constantine," said the Patriarch firmly.

"Thou must put her away forthwith and for ever, and do penance for the incestuous union that has been begun in the ignorance of the true facts that the Church had not time to repair."

"Put away her to whom I have been joined by thy own act, by the solemn words—till death do us part? Put away my wife, dost say, venerable Patriarch?"

"The canon of the Sixth Council is precise and conclusive," said Polyeuctus.

"And if I refuse to accept this fantastic rule of spiritual affinity?" asked the Basileus.

"It will be my painful duty towards God to pronounce on your Majesty the most terrible sentence of excommunication known to Holy Church, to forbid you all access to the House of God, to the altar of Christ, to the shrine of His Mother—to deprive you of every rite or privilege of Christian man. Basileus of the Romans, I warn thee, thou wilt be in worse case than the Hagarene and the Pagan, who at least have something they believe to be divine whom they can adore."

Nicephorus was himself so deeply saturated with reverence for the mysteries, and had so long been accustomed to bow down before the piety of the Patriarch, that he mastered his emotion on hearing this tremendous sentence, and desired time to reflect.

"Venerable Patriarch of the Mother Church of our Empire, withdraw from our presence. We will take counsel on this matter," said the Basileus, with stern dignity and wonderful self-control.

He took no counsel but of his own heart in the storm of passion which shook his soul hour after hour upon this cruel shock to his pride, his love, and his fear of God. Long he paced the chamber, foaming with rage, like a caged lion. As night fell, he summoned a trusty Cubicular and bade him tell the Patriarch that the Emperor would not part from the Empress whilst breath was in his body. Then he hurried to the hareem of the great Palace, and flung himself into the arms of his beloved wife—that paradise for which he was willing to brave eternal damnation.

The Cubicular returned with the formal message from the Patriarch that excommunication would be pronounced in full conclave on the following day.

Nicephorus was not the man to give his enemy time to

attack. By daybreak he had summoned a council of all the prelates of the distant provinces who had come up to the capital to do homage to the new Sovereign, and to them he added leading members of the Senate and nobles. The Basileus himself presided; and he demanded a formal response to his question if his marriage, solemnised in church by the Patriarch and his Chapter, were not an indissoluble union by the laws of God and man, over-riding any figment of spiritual affinity contracted by a mere ritual form.

The Council, overshadowed as it was by the authority of the Autocrat, discussed the question at great length and with prodigious learning. The senators and officials urged the assembly to pronounce in favour of the Basileus; but not a few of the bishops clung to the sacred authority of a formal canon of a general council. This seemed to them imperative, and incapable of any dispensation or avoidance. Nicephorus with difficulty suppressed his impatience, fearing that by the delay the Patriarch might anticipate him by a formal sentence. But here a highly ingenious prelate, the Bishop of Cæsarea, a compatriot and devoted supporter of the family of Phocas, arose and said—

"August Basileus and venerable prelates of our Holy Church, Lords, Senators, and Ministers of State, methinks we are forgetting the date and origin of this canon which is appealed to in order to annul the solemn consecration of marriage between our gracious Autocrat and the Augusta. The canon in question was formally promulgated in the reign and by the authority of the ill-omened usurper and enemy of the Church, Constantine, of evil name and infamous memory, as part and parcel of his abominable tyranny and persecution. The canon was decreed as binding on the Church by those heretics and miscreants who attempted to suppress the use of holy images in our worship. Now it is known to all men that the acts of the Iconoclasts, whether Sovereigns or Patriarchs, have been formally pronounced by Church and by State to be null and void and of no authority or effect. This canon, even if well and lawfully approved by the Church, has never been promulgated by any but a sacrilegious and heretical usurper of the throne of the Romans. And I call on you, reverend fathers in God, and honoured lords, to declare that the canon is no bar to the lawful and most religious marriage contracted by their Majesties at the altar of God and in presence of the reverend Patriarch himself."

This speech was received with such a tumult of approval and relief by the Imperial party in the Council, that Nicephorus abruptly declared the proposal of the Bishop of Cæsarea to be adopted, and he took care to have it instantly conveyed as a judgment to the Patriarch. Polyeuctus was not the man tamely to submit to such an evasion, and he fiercely inveighed against an attempt to abrogate a canon which, for two hundred years, had never been directly impugned or set aside. In this contention he was supported by his own Chapter of the Holy Wisdom; and a state of indescribable excitement arose in the Church and in the city, as a conflict seemed imminent between the Metropolitan, supported by his clergy, and the Emperor, supported by the Senate and provincial prelates. For a whole day the storm raged round Church and Palace, and men feared that the horrible scandals were about to be renewed as in the old days of the image-breakers, when the Church and all those, both clerical and lay, who clung to the Patriarch defied the Iconoclast Emperors and their Court, and endured cruel persecution in defence of their holy and ever-to-be-venerated *ikons*.

In the midst of this confusion the Court chaplain, Stylianos, unwilling to suffer disgrace and exile, and hopeful, perhaps, of future promotion, bethought him that, in the ceremony of baptism, which had been hurriedly and privately performed owing to the precarious health of the new-born infant, Nicephorus had simply been present as representing his aged father, Bardas, who was the true sponsor of the infant Prince. Nicephorus remembered that such had been the intention, but what passed in the haste of the impromptu ceremony had escaped his memory. And Bardas, when appealed to, called to mind that Romanus, the Autocrat, had sent him a summons to attend the ceremony, which his own age and infirmities had prevented him from doing at the time. Polyeuctus was persuaded by the Prime Minister, Basil, by Stylianos, the chaplain, and even by the monk, Athanasius, to accept this solution of the imbroglio, on condition that Nicephorus himself should swear on the relics of Saint Theodore that he had attended the ceremony of baptism as his father's proctor, and that Bardas also should swear on the relics that he had been summoned as real sponsor of the Prince. This was done in presence of the Patriarch; who, thereupon admitting on sworn testimony that no spiritual affinity, in fact, existed between Nicephorus and

Theophano, consented to withhold his terrible ban. With a mind full of foreboding, he recognised the Imperial marriage as valid, though nothing could induce his stern and devout nature to relieve the Emperor from the penance of being forbidden to enter the holy place of the temple till a year had passed after contracting a second marriage with one who had so lately been the wife of another.

The storm passed, and the open breach between Empire and Church was avoided, or, at best, postponed. But Nicephorus to his dying day remembered the public stigma which had been passed on the marriage for which he had sacrificed so much. And the Patriarch, with gloomy misgivings, looked forward in pain to the issues of a reign which he had done so much to promote, but which had opened with such sinister omens in the House of God and in the eyes of Holy Church.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SARACEN PERIL

The Emperor now applied his whole mind to affairs of State with all the burning energy of his nature; and he sat day by day with his chosen officers in secret council, dictating orders to his Proto-secretis. Though he submitted with the best grace he could command to the public ceremonials and pilgrimages which policy and the traditions of his office required him to perform in person, his absorbing task was the organisation of his army, the navy, the finances, and the Imperial administration. And though the wound so ostentatiously inflicted at once on his pride and his love by the fanaticism of the Patriarch lay deep in his mind as an open sore, he remained unshaken in his devotion to Holy Church, and in profound regard for the hermit of Mount Athos.

The very day after this fierce struggle, Nicephorus was closeted with Digenes, and was imparting to him his great schemes for the restoration of the Roman name.

"From the time of our mighty predecessor, Heraclius," said he, "for more than three hundred years, the children of the False Prophet have been gaining step by step upon the children of Christ. A few generations more and they will have blotted out the Church of God and His Mother. The prophet of the Lord may well say to the Hagarene—'Hast thou killed and also hast thou taken possession?'"

"Nay," interrupted the ardent young Warden, "such victories as those of thy father Bardas, of thy grandfathers and kinsmen of Armenia, and, above all, thy own most glorious achievements in Crete and in Syria, in Cilicia and Aleppo, bear witness that Christ will not forsake His people for ever, and that the days of glory of the Prophet are no more."

"We beat them back time and again, and the tide has turned on our side within the last indiction. But as I look back over these centuries, stained with all the savage tyranny of the

Image-breakers, and the follies of our Isaurians, Amorians, Arabians, and Khazars on the throne, Michael 'the Monk,' Michael 'the Stammerer,' and Michael 'the Drunkard,' I see that the Koran is steadily driving back the Cross. One or other will assuredly perish in the long combat at last."

"At what point will you strike them first?" asked Digenes abruptly.

"The power of the great Asian Caliphate has been weakened by rivalries, rebellions, and divisions, but it is by no means broken. The 'accursed Chamdas' snake is scotched, but not killed. The Hamdanite family is still as active and fierce as ever. Aleppo, Antioch, Edessa, obey their victorious Emirs, and persecute our believers. Whilst Syria with all its cities and resources is a stronghold of the Hagarene dynasty, our Eastern Themes are ever open to their cruel raids and devastating incursions. I tell thee, my son, my first and greatest task is to crush the Chamdas, who seems to rise ever stronger after every defeat."

"Seîf Eddaulêh! a hero worthy even of your sword," said the Warden.

"Hero, it may be, but a deadly enemy of Christ and His people," said Nicephorus. "He or I must fall in this death grapple. My officers are now mustering upon the Anatolian frontier the most numerous army and the best equipped that Rome has sent forth since the time of Heraclius. The moment it is ready, I shall put myself at its head and march upon Syria, into which we shall pour as we did when we swept back the Chamdas into his rock-bound citadel as a hunted lion is driven to his pathless lair."

"Will it be Aleppo, Antioch, or Edessa that you strike first?" asked Digenes eagerly.

"God in heaven knows, my son," replied the General solemnly, with a touch of irony in his voice, "and we shall all know in His good time."

"But you will not leave to the Prophet the Holy Land of Abraham, of David, and Christ Himself? Have you no care for Damascus, Beyruth, and Jerusalem?—the tombs of the holy ones and the scene of the birth and death of the Lord Himself?"

"Be not too eager, my son. How are we to reach these holy places, lost to Christ all these hundreds of years, until we have driven the Hagarene swarms from the passes of the

Amanus and the Lebanon? Assuredly Jerusalem and Bethlehem are our ultimate goal which the Cross shall one day enter, though it is a sight that I shall never live to see, no! nor your son's son. But there is that which to a soldier, if not to a priest, is more sacred than the manger of Bethlehem or the hill of Calvary, and that is the rescuing from the dungeons and hareems and slave-markets of the Infidel the men and women, girls and children, of our Christian people. There is a care more urgent on an Emperor of Rome than the recovery of any relic or any place of pilgrimage, and that is the safety and enlargement of the Roman realm."

"There are victorious realms of Islam to the south: in Africa, in Egypt, and in Tunis," said the Warden sadly; "and these last are pressing even to death and slavery the last remnant of the Christian defenders of Sicily, to say nothing of Spain, where you sent me of late to the splendid kingdom of the Caliph of the West."

"Yes! our brethren in Sicily are in great danger of destruction; and I am preparing another great army and another fleet to relieve and succour them. This indeed will be dispatched before another moon, and will take precedence even of my own campaign."

"And will the Catholic Sovereigns of Alemaine who have annexed so much of the Italian dominions do nothing to save their fellow-Christians in Sicily in the hour of their distress?" asked Digenes.

"Nothing," said the Emperor fiercely, "nay, worse than nothing. These Saxon barbarians beyond the Danube aim at the destruction of our Holy Roman Empire, of which they usurp the titles, and copy the practices and institutions. It will be a black day for the city and throne of Constantine when Frank and Latin marauders shall dare to assail them in force. They talk still of alliances, exchange of courtesies, and even of intermarriage; but they mean in their hearts rivalry, treachery, and war. They are biding their time till they can blot out the Byzantine name and Church."

"And the Bishop of old Rome on the Tiber, who calls himself Pope, and Supreme Head of Christ's Church, will not he intercede for the suffering remnant of the Christians of Sicily?" asked Digenes.

"What! he!" broke forth Nicephorus passionately, "the son of the old harlot, the old bandit, the assassin, the catamite,

who pollutes that Lateran cloister which is now a brothel and a gamester's hell. The Catholic Church is the deadly rival and foe of our Orthodox Church. It is ever plotting our ruin and inciting its royal patrons to destroy us. It is more deadly than either Saracen or Saxon. They indeed may end in working our ruin; but the Catholic Church, whilst ever working to our ruin, is ever bearing false witness to vilify, calumniate, and ridicule all we have and all we do in Church or in State, in war or in peace. We stand on the Bosphorus between two sleepless enemies—fierce unbelievers on the east, and traitors to Christ on the west. And we who have defended the Roman name and the Christian faith for three hundred years against the onslaught of Islam, we, the bulwark of Christ and the Mother of God, we are ever being assailed by the masters of the Latin provinces; and for ever we are being maligned by the degraded prelacy which has usurped the tomb and see of St. Peter. No! my son, the Romans of the East had better invoke the aid of Satan, Moloch, or Beelzebub, the father of lies, before they trust the words of a Latin priest."

"But on the north we have dangerous enemies as well, and even more near to us—Bulgarians, Slavs, Huns, Patzinaks, and Russ. They have ere now swept down on Byzantium like a winter snow-storm from the Euxine, and they may sweep down again. Have you given thought to them, Sir?" asked Digenes.

"Much thought, my son," replied the Emperor, "but though they are nearer than Saracen or Latin, they are quite disunited, and full of fierce rivalries, jealousies, and ambitions. If one is our enemy, it makes the rest our friends. When the Bulgarian becomes dangerous, we will hire the Turk or the Russ to fall upon his back. The whole Balkan peninsula is a den of savage beasts who are ever snarling at each other, and waiting to spring on each other unawares. If they could only agree for an hour, they would join in a combined attack upon us; and their vast hordes and limitless cavalry might make them a formidable foe to beat. But we will take them one by one, and swallow them at leisure as one eats the leaves of an artichoke. Before the Bulgarian can move, we will take care to have the Russ upon his back. I can hear in my day-dreams the roar of our people in the Hippodrome on the day when a Basileus of New Rome shall be hailed on his victories over the Northern realm of Crumn and of Symeon as 'the Victorious Lord,' 'the

Slaughterer of the Bulgarians,'" said the Emperor, with prophetic fervour deepening his voice.

"And the Russ of Kiev and the coasts of the Euxine and the Chersonnesus," asked Digenes, "are they not within your plans?"

"The Russ and Patzinaks who swarm along the northern rivers which flow into the Euxine are too far off us, too restless and nomad, and altogether too loosely organised as settled nations to endanger the Roman Empire," said Nicephorus proudly. "The Russ make fine guardsmen for us, and are willing to do our service for proper reward at any time. We will civilise and Christianise them, and teach them to keep Bulgarians and Turks in order. Ah!" he went on, musing with something of prophetic strain, "Byzantium may fall before the Infidels of the East—nay, even before the schismatic Latins of the West—but before the Northern barbarians never! If they strove for a thousand years these Varangians shall never seat their Tsars upon the Golden Horn."

"Then wherein lie the great dangers of the Empire?" asked the Lord Warden.

"In the corruption of officials, in malversation of the finances, and in the womanish spirit of the people of the great cities of the Greek peninsula. The mongrel mobs which fill our Forum and Hippodrome here in Byzantium, the Hellenes of the Peloponnese and the Ægean islands and seaboard, are good only to tax—or to row ships—not to bear arms and defend their country. Happily we can fill our armies with good men and true from the highlands of Thrace, Epirus, and Macedonia, from the plains and hills of Asia Minor, and from all the wild tribesmen who swarm in the frontier Themes of the Empire."

"Where then is the difficulty if there are men enough and men good enough? for I ask for none better than the troopers I have led in Cilicia, Crete, and Syria," said Digenes.

"The enormous efforts we have to make against a circle of foes, the vast armies and fleets we need to raise—to say nothing of the subsidies we have to offer to barbarian tributaries—absorb immense sums which drain the wealth even of this, the richest empire of the world. Our immediate need is strict administration of the finances. Thrift! thrift! my son, is the first of duties to a king, even whilst gold is poured forth like water from the Imperial exchequer, but so that all serves to purchase money's worth and solid results. Victories are won

and conquests are made, not alone by stout hearts and strong arms, but by honest handling of unlimited wealth."

"And is not the Roman Empire wealthy?" asked the Lord Warden.

"But not wealthy enough for all its needs," the Emperor rejoined with passion, "whilst half its lands are held by lazy priests and monks, who neither serve in arms nor pay their taxes; whilst half the people of the luxurious cities of old Hellas wear the cowl or the stole. Half monk as I am myself, and monk and hermit as I have striven in vain to be, my very first care will be to curb this dry-rot in our people, this flinging away in idle monasteries of the precious wealth of the Empire, this consecration to hypocritical sloth of so large a part of our people. It is not God they worship, but some Heathen Idol—some Sacred Hog—as the Apostle himself says—'evil beasts, slow bellies.'"

But here the colloquy was interrupted by a messenger from Basil, the Prime Minister, craving immediate audience on urgent matters of State. Nicephorus received him alone in private.

The great Eunuch had hurried to the Palace to inform the Emperor of the receipt of grave news from Sicily, and the arrival of envoys from the distressed Christians of Messina, who came to implore immediate help.

One of the first acts of Nicephorus, after his victorious campaigns over the Saracens of the Eastern Caliphate, had been to denounce the treaty of peace made in a time of weakness with the Saracens of Africa, who were now masters of Sicily. He had insisted on refusing further payment of the eleven thousand pieces of gold with which the Governor of Calabria had sought to buy off Saracen invasions. Thereupon the Fatimite Caliph Mouizz of Tunis ordered an immediate investment of Rametta near Messina, which was the sole remaining hold of the Christian power in the island. In Rametta, a rocky fortress in the mountains west of Messina, the last defenders of the Cross had taken refuge, and with them were all that had escaped the destruction of the cities of Sicily.

"The news is indeed grave," said the Prime Minister; "no spot in all Sicily remained to us after the terrible storming of Taormina and the loss of Messina except this fortress of Rametta, which is now closely invested. In Italy the Empire holds effective possession of little but the Themes of Calabria

and Apulia on the southern and eastern seaboards. If we lose all territory west of the Dyrrhachian coast and the Hellenic islands, the name of Rome will be brought low indeed, and all Western Europe will be divided between the Saracen and the Teuton."

"True," said the Emperor, "it is our first duty to save the brave outpost at Rametta, and the expedition already being fitted out must be pushed on night and day with special haste. See to it, my Lord, the vanguard with a hundred ships and ten thousand men will sail from the Golden Horn on the third day from to-night."

"It is impossible, Sire," replied Basil, after making some brief calculations in his notebook.

"Nothing is impossible," said Nicephorus, "it will be done. And send to-night our swiftest dispatch boats with orders to the Governors of the Peloponnesian Theme of Bari, and of the Calabrian Theme, to meet the new force with every man and every ship they can spare with safety."

"They shall sail within an hour," said Basil, "and whom do you destine to command the expedition?"

"I have already commissioned Basil Digenes to the task, to take up command when the entire armament is ready to start. But things are so urgent in Sicily that it might be best to send him with the advance force which is to go at once. His heroic and dashing temper will fire the whole army he is to lead."

"He is sorely needed still in the city to organise the expedition in all its details. We are sending out the biggest men-of-war that have ever left our docks, with every munition and engine of war that our engineers can devise. We have equipped more than forty thousand of our best men, of whom nearly half are cavalry."

"Remember, that in this crisis speed is of more importance than numbers, and dash is more needed than strategy," said the Emperor.

"With such a foe, rashness would be fatal," replied the Minister gloomily, "but I go to carry out your Majesty's orders," said Basil, hesitating.

"They are my last words," replied Nicephorus peremptorily, as he closed the interview. "I have ardently desired to command this expedition to Sicily in person. But it cannot be. The vast and growing power of the Saracens of the East on our Syrian and Cilician borders is even more menacing and

more urgent than the rescue of the brave Sicilian garrison in the West. It is a matter of myriads in the East rather than hundreds in the West—the loss of a rich province, not of a fortress. I must reserve myself at home to organise the armament for Asia until I go to lead it myself."

As the Minister withdrew Theophano herself entered the Emperor's cabinet. The stern and anxious look which his face had worn during the conversations with Digenes and Basil on the crisis of the State passed off like a summer storm-cloud as the form of his adored wife appeared. He started from his seat, rose, and went to meet her with arms outstretched. He took both her white hands in his huge grasp, drew her towards him, and looked with love and inquiry into her eyes.

"And what would my Queen have?" he asked; "all that I have is hers: all that I can win shall be hers."

She fondled him and patted his cheek, piercing him with her radiant eyes, and said, "Does my hero think I come to ask for jewels, palaces, or provinces, or any woman's toy? I am the helpmate of my Lord, the Basileus. Together we mounted to the throne of Rome, and together we will raise its eternal name to a higher glory. I come not to ask for gewgaws, but to take counsel on affairs of State."

"You have heard the black news from the Far West?" asked Nicephorus.

"I have. And I come to say that the Emperor must not be tempted to go to the succour of this distant fort: he has his great expedition into Syria to prepare. He must not desert his capital, his army of the East, his Council of Ministers—his wife—her from whom these priests seek to part him."

"Your wishes and your counsels exactly jump with my own, my Empress," said Nicephorus, smiling and joyful. "I have work here more urgent even than the relief of Rametta. My place will be well filled by the Akritas, Basil Digenes, whom I have decided to dispatch at once with the advance force."

"Surely not," replied the Augusta; "Basil Digenes is an honourable man and a noble soldier, but his marriage to the Princess Agatha will make him a Prince of the Basilian dynasty, uncle of my sons—an inevitable rival to them, a possible rebel to yourself."

"Digenes is the soul of honour," said Nicephorus warmly, "I would trust him with my life. I would trust him as I trust my God—as I trust you, the Saint of my prayers."

"He seems to be even better trusted—better loved," she said, with a bewitching air of jealousy. Theophano continued to pout. Silence ensued.

"My hero of the Eastern wars little knows the quicksands and whirlpools of our Bosphorus and all the intrigues of this Palace and Court and people. A successful soldier after a great triumph over the Saracen will find himself forced into the vermilion buskins by the shouts of the people and the swords of his men, and driven to head a Palace revolution, however much he struggle against it himself. Is it not so, my Lord Basileus, who dethroned me and my sons, however much he sought to bury his glory in a cell on Mount Athos?" And the woman shot forth alternate beams of reproach and admiration, irony and love.

Nicephorus felt himself in a world of intrigue that he could not understand, which he despised, but could not master. He remained silent and in deep meditation.

"You must name for this office," she said, "members of your own family and close allies of yourself."

"Whom have I?" said he sadly. "I have no kinsman competent whom I can spare. I have no creatures of my own. I never had. I never will have."

"Nay!" said she at once, "you have a cousin, one of the bravest and most dashing soldiers of Rome, the Patrician Manuel, son, at any rate in blood, of your uncle Leo Phocas—of him whom the usurper Lecapenus treacherously seized and blinded forty years ago. Manuel is bound to the house of Phocas for ever, his bar-sinister makes any rivalry impossible. He is a man of the most fiery nature, one whom the soldiers love to follow."

"Too fiery, perhaps," said Nicephorus, musing; "but the crisis demands the most reckless valour."

"Then put him in charge of the vanguard, and let the general command be reserved for Nicetas, one of our Proto-vestiaries, and brother of Michael, who served us so often as messenger."

"What! the Eunuch, Nicetas?" said Nicephorus—"a man of hearty piety and profound learning, but hardly fit to lead a forlorn hope."

"No! Manuel will lead the charge," said Theophano, "no captain in your whole army a more desperate fire-eater, and Nicetas with his wisdom and coolness will keep the hot blood of Manuel in restraint."

"I will think of it," said the Emperor, who himself had often been inspired by the wild courage of his young kinsman; "I will consider what you urge."

"No!" said the temptress. "Promise me this, if you love me."

Nicephorus did not promise; but in the end he committed the great expedition to his cousin Manuel as cavalry leader, with Nicetas as admiral of the fleet; and to them he added a prelate Nicephorus, one of the ablest administrators in the Empire.

The issue was a terrible disaster. The expedition was hurried to the Sicilian waters, where the unenterprising Nicetas wasted it in petty diversions round the coast. Manuel forced his cavalry across the Straits of Messina, and captured that city. He dashed down along the coast, recovering Taormina, Leontini, Termini, and Syracuse. Then, mad with triumph, and not waiting for the whole of the force to join him, he rushed to the rescue of Rametta. As the morning sun rose he could see the rocky citadel still uncaptured, as it stood proudly in the midst of a vast amphitheatre of precipitous crags. The three defiles which led into the plain were forced one by one by the impetuous charges of the Byzantines; and thence Manuel, intoxicated with victory, plunged on to the walls of the beleaguered city. Here he was met by the Saracen General in person, who had gathered round him his reserve—a band of swarthy sons of the desert in snow-white tunics, wielding lances and swords of perfect temper. A desperate hand-to-hand combat ensued wherein Manuel fell in the midst of a mingled heap of Africans and Byzantines. The loss of their hot-headed chief threw the whole cavalry into confusion, for their leader, instead of keeping them in hand and directing their movements, had scattered them far and wide over the plain. Confusion turned to panic—panic became a massacre. As night fell, ten thousand Byzantines lay on the bloody field, for the Saracens made no prisoners. The relieving expedition was repulsed—the captured cities were retaken, Rametta fell. And a dark cloud rested on the reign of the new Emperor: his grievous error sank into his soul.

CHAPTER XX

AN EMPEROR'S DAY

Day after day the Emperor rose at dawn, and with his staff rode forth to the *Strategion*, the great review ground of the city —the *Campus Martius* of New Rome—to exercise troops newly arrived as contingents for the army of the East. The day after the sailing of the Sicilian expedition (destined to end as ill as another famous Sicilian expedition) there was a lively stir in the Palace to witness the manœuvres of a division of five thousand horsemen recently arrived from the Upper Danube—Magyars as we call them—Turks as they were then named—a tribe which had been admitted to settle within the limits of the Empire.

Basil Digenes, Bardas Skleros, with our young friend Eric still at his side, and a crowd of officers rode into the ground on the staff of the Emperor. The *Strategion*, or review ground, stood on the low land to the west of the modern "Seraglio," close to the Golden Horn, between the Stamboul end of the floating bridge and the present railway terminus. Bardas called Eric's attention to the typical monuments with which it was adorned—the equestrian statue of Constantine the Great, and the pillar bearing the Imperial edict, whereby New Rome had been endowed with the name and privileges of the city of the Tiber.

"Six hundred and thirty years have passed," said the General to his young follower, "since our immortal Founder placed us here on this Golden Horn beneath the new Seven Hills, and more than a thousand years had passed before he moved Rome from the Tiber to the Bosphorus. These various subject tribes, allies, and tributaries whose arms and ensigns cover this great plain to-day, change and pass, form new nations, and go from one seat to another—but Rome exists for ever. In one thousand seven hundred years she has never met her conqueror, nor even her match."

Eric's history was far too slight and vague to enable him to follow this bold boast, much less to dispute it; but, where all was wonderful and gigantic, he accepted the antiquity of the city with awe. His mind was wholly occupied with the martial sight spread out before him. In front of head-quarters, where stood what we now call "the Saluting point," was stationed a detachment of the Varangian Guard, who to-day were told off as an escort to the General, to keep the ground and mark the lines. Opposite to them, at the further limit of the ground, was the position of the Macedonian heavy-armed shieldmen. Hirsute Abasgians and Iberians from the southern valleys of the Caucasus, on mountain ponies and in shaggy sheepskins and furs, held another side of the ground. But the main interest of the day was a series of cavalry charges and evolutions by the mass of Magyar mounted archers, which was the latest body of troopers enlisted in the Imperial army. The Emperor glowed with pride and hope as he shouted the word of command—which was repeated in Hungarian dialects by the "interpreter," or captain of each squadron—and as he watched the rapid movements and consummate horsemanship of men who then, as now, were accounted to rank with the finest cavalry of their age. Nicephorus, a cavalry man from youth, called his staff round him, and enlarged with enthusiasm and in detail on the paramount importance of the mounted arm in war, and he forced on them those lessons as to scouting, rapidity in advance, and the system of successive charges which are laid down so authoritatively in his own book on *Tactics*.

As they rode with the staff in the exercises, Eric plied his General with inquiries and amused him with his naïve remarks. The young hero, who had seen active service already with several different nations, had already that soldier's eye which distinguished him so much in after years in the campaigns of Basil II. against the Bulgarians; when, under the adopted name of Nicephorus Ouranos, he gained so splendid a victory over King Samuel. What amazed the young Norwegian was the complicated evolution whereby a whole cavalry division of five thousand troopers was regularly divided into four lines—the first the fighting line, the second the supporting line, the third behind them as another reserve, and fourthly, detachments on either wings. And small squadrons were detached to lie-in-wait, and were called the "outlying guard."

"The force now engaged in manœuvres," said Bardas to his

young aide, whose military genius he had already perceived and resolved to train, "the force on the field, is what we call 'a division' (or *turma*). Each division, you observe, is composed of two 'brigades' (or *drungi*). Each brigade of five 'regiments' (*bandæ*). The senior general of division, whom we call a *turmarch*, leads the front line, stationed in the centre of it with his standard-bearer, orderlies, and trumpeters. Then you will see the intervals between the regiments to enable the reserve to pass through or the front line to retire in order."

"Oh! but this is a complicated order of battle indeed," said Eric. "Is all this quadruple and quintuple disposition observed on the field in actual war, or is it a mere peace manœuvre to practise discipline?"

"This is but the ABC of tactics, my son," said Bardas, smiling; "of course, a Roman army on the field of battle is drawn up as you see it here, with all these rules—all of them and a great many more. All this is what you have to learn, my young friend."

"But it is difficult to follow it with the eye in the clouds of dust, and the rapid manœuvres of the squadrons," said the youth, perplexed by the amazing variety of the interlacing movements he saw.

"Well, you must study your books of military science. You don't suppose a Roman general is to be made without hard study of rules and formations in our manuals of the Art of War. There is the excellent *Strategicon* of the illustrious Emperor Maurice, which, old as it is, is still to be read. Then there is the *Tactics* of the Emperor Leo the Learned, ancestor of the young Basileis minors; and, above all others, there is the *Tactics* of our present Augustus, which I have myself drafted at his dictation, and which is being now circulated to the army chiefs in the rough. Pore over that by night, my boy, and practise its rules by day, and you may one day lead a Roman army yourself."

"But I never saw or heard anything of all this *science* as you call it," said Eric, puzzled. "I have seen hard fighting with Danes, Russ, and Bulgars. I have seen the Frank knights on the Seine. Indeed, I was a squire of Rudolph when he marched to join the great King of the Germans in the expedition wherein he routed the Magyars. And I saw the flower of the Saracens of Spain when the Caliph Abderrahman was buried at Cordova. But we never heard anything of divisions, brigades, and

regiments, much less of first, second, and third lines of attack, reserves, and flank charges. With Russ, Franks, Saxons, and Saracens, each chief leads his own men-at-arms, and they follow his pennon as close as they can."

"Why, of course you never heard of all this amongst these wild men," cried Bardas aloud, with a hearty laugh; "the Roman army is the only army on earth that is scientifically equipped and led by officers who are masters of their art. These outlandish barbarians are brave enough, and strong enough, and proud enough, God knows, but they know less of the glorious arts of war, of tactics, manœuvres, and stratagem than any one of those transport details you see waiting there with the carts and spades and shovels, or indeed less than any common bearer from the ambulance train. A Frank or Saxon knight, even a Saracen Emir, would think he knew the whole of his business when he could sit his charger, wield his lance and his sword with dexterity, and lead a mob of his own followers pell-mell in a furious charge."

"Aye, I have seen Saxons, Franks, and Lombards charge like a herd of wild bulls in the Thuringian forests," said Eric.

"Oh! heroic enough, no doubt," said Bardas, with a sardonic smile; "these knight-errants would prefer to lose a battle amidst prodigies of valour rather than to win it by craft and science. To us Byzantines craft and science are two-thirds of war!"

"And is the whole Roman army thus organised in divisions, brigades, regiments, and attendant corps—and has each squadron and regiment a distinctive arm and uniform of its own?" asked Eric again.

"Certainly," said Bardas; "a Roman army consists of *regulars* regularly drilled, equipped, and armed. They are not a levy of countrymen or a casual muster of followers, tenants, vassals, and tribesmen."

As the heat of the day began to strike, the corps were paraded, distributed, and marched off to barracks. The young Varangian was amazed at the ease and precision with which so large a force was drawn off the review ground to barracks in various quarters, and the exact order which each arm and detachment observed. Light and heavy cavalry, bowmen, shieldmen, and foot guards drew off in turn, with the regularity of a modern review, each corps attended by its own followers, engineers, transport, and bearers—with carts, pack-horses, and camp

utensils, spades, picks, saws, arrows, and bolts—the whole equipped to take the field.

The following day was appointed for the reception of embassies from foreign rulers, tributaries, and tribes, who had been deputed to congratulate the new Sovereign. Bardas Skleros was on duty in the Court of the Emperor, and he desired to impress the imagination of his young follower, whose great promise as a soldier of keen intelligence and strong character he had begun to recognise. Accordingly, he placed Eric under the charge of his honour, Symmachos, a Silentiary, or Gentleman-in-Waiting of the Chambers, who undertook to coach the young Norseman in the ceremonies of the day. No part of the Imperial system was more important than the practice of the military officials to attract new blood into their service and to impress on outlying tribesmen of all nations a sense of the power and culture of the Empire.

Eric entered the Sacred Palace from the Augusteum through the Brazen Porch of Chalcé, where he was now known to the guards and porters, and making his way through the *Triclinium* of the *Scholares*, i.e. the Guard-room of the Body-Guard, into the great open Outer Court, he passed through the bronze gates there, where he was met by Symmachos in the spacious cloister in which there stood, apart from the main Palace, the sumptuous court known as the Magnaura. He was allowed to witness the passage of their Majesties through the Gallery of the Forty Saints, adorned with colossal mosaic representations of the chief martyrs and glories of the Orthodox Church ; and so on through the *Sigma*, or Great Oval, to the Long Corridor of the Daphne. The Emperor and Empress were escorted by their Cubiculars, Spathaires, Vestiaries, Lords and Ladies-in-Waiting, Gold Stick, and Sword-bearers, all marshalled by the Grand Master of the Household. All were in state robes and gold-embroidered mantles, with collars and badges, according to their rank and office. From the Long Corridor of the Daphne, their Majesties passed into the Church of our Lord, which in former dynasties had been the private chapel of the Palace. There they received the lighted wax candles which they placed before the sacred emblem, and prostrated themselves in worship at the altar over which stood the grand and pathetic figure of the Redeemer of mankind.

Whilst their Majesties were engaged in their devotions, the Silentiary took the young guardsman into the great Hall of

Magnaura, which he had not previously seen. It stood, as we have said, apart from the Sacred Palace itself, in the gardens to the north, and it abutted on the Senate House, and Church of Mary of the Copper mart which lay between it and the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom. This magnificent Basilica was in the oblong form with a semicircular apse, and a raised platform, of which examples remain to us in Rome, Pompeii, and in Greece and Asia Minor. On each side six porphyry columns supported the gilded cornice and formed the openings to seven lateral *exedras*, or recesses. Beside the terminal apse, there rose from the platform on which stood the throne four vast monoliths of the lovely green marble of Sparta—in groups of two each on either side. The walls of the hall were entirely covered with panels of Proconnesian and Phrygian streaked marbles, as we see it to-day in Aya Sophia. The capitals were mainly of bronze gilt, in form such as we see at St. Mark's at Venice. The central doors were also of bronze gilt. The roof was covered with mosaic designs made of glass and gilt tesseræ, having figures of the Saviour, Virgin, and Saints, mixed with arabesque patterns of vine leaves, acanthus, Greek crosses, monograms, and exquisite geometric traceries.

As Eric entered and surveyed in mute awe this grand edifice, glowing with soft radiance like a sunset, for its supreme splendour of colour was harmonised into a tone of solemnity and peace, the royal architects were just giving the last touches to the special adornments of the day. Gilded chains were suspended from column to column, and from each chain was hung a huge candelabrum of silver, each bearing twenty-five lamps. Tapestries and curtains were hung over the doorways and lateral recesses, and partly concealed the golden organ and choir of the Emperor on one side, and the silver organ and choir of the Factions on the other side. Rich rugs, of the design we now call Persian, were strewn over the marble flooring of the Hall and across the steps and the daïs whereon the Imperial *cortège* was to stand.

That which to the untutored but imaginative mind of the young Viking was the most beautiful and mystic work before him was the Throne of Solomon, which served as the Emperor's seat. It had been exactly reproduced from the account of the First Book of Kings, Chap. x.

"The king made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with the best gold. The throne had six steps, and the top of the throne was round

behind: and there were stays on either side on the place of the seat, and two lions stood beside the stays. And twelve lions stood there on the one side and on the other upon the six steps: there was not the like made in any kingdom."

The Emperors of the Romans, who claimed to be in a sense the successors of the chosen people, and who are often represented in illuminated manuscripts in royal robes as Kings of Israel, had carefully restored the Throne of Solomon as their seat of high state. The chair itself was of ivory and gold, and the lions which supported the arms of the chair were of silver gilt, as were the smaller lions which acted as supporters on the six steps below it. Such a throne was taken as a pattern throughout the West; and the famous seat of Dagobert in the Louvre is supported by lions in the same way. The "Throne of Solomon," however, was not a *curule chair*—but a much more solid and magnificent erection, having a high back adorned with gems and enamel enrichments. Eric gazed in amazement and awe at the splendid Hall; but he was presently dragged by his guide to witness the procession that was forming in the courtyard outside the Magnaura itself.

The Magistri, the Patricians, and the Senate in a body, with a crowd of officials of various ranks, awaited the summons to attend the Court. A Silentiary having given the signal, Eric and Symmachos were able to enter the Hall and view the approach of their Majesties. Before they took their seats on the thrones, the Imperial crowns, with their long pendants of pearls and gems, were placed on their heads, and the royal mantles were thrown over their state robes. Nicephorus himself sat on the "Throne of Solomon," Theophano at his left hand, and the two child-Basileis on low stools behind them. Around them were placed the secretaries and notaries to take a report of the words spoken, with the Logothete, or Finance Minister, and the Chancellor. In the rear behind the throne stood a crowd of Cubiculars, Silentiaries, and the Lords-in-Waiting and Gentlemen of the Golden Banqueting Chamber.

When the royal party were all seated and placed, the Master of the Household gave the signal for the Sacramental cheer; and from the choirs behind the curtains and from the crowd at the end of the Hall broke forth the ritual chant—"Long, long live our Basileus! Long live our Basilissa! Many, many happy years give them, O Lord God!" At another signal from the Master of the Household, the Gold Stick in Waiting

introduced the first "Curtain," *i.e.* the Magistri or Marshals, who had been stationed in the nearest recess. The Magistri advanced to the throne and prostrated themselves before the steps. A second Usher introduced the second "Curtain," *i.e.* the Patricians, who stood next in rank, and so on, the Senators, and each successive order in due turn, drawing aside the curtain which served to mark their place in the ceremonial.

It was now the turn of the foreign envoys, the first of whom were from the powerful Caliph of Cordova, now Hakim II., with whom relations of amity were still maintained. The Master of the Household again signalled to the Gold Stick, who, with great ceremony, introduced the mission, at the head of which was the Emir Ghâlib, supported by the learned Ibn Khaldûn, the same who had escorted Digenes and his companions in the capital of the Spanish Empire. The Emir was accompanied on his right hand by the Catepâno, or Master of the Ceremonies, on the left by the Master of the Horse, and was attended by an interpreter and his secretaries. The envoy of the mighty Caliph was permitted to make his obeisance in his own way—whilst the envoys of the rude tribes of the North or the East were required to prostrate themselves at full length before the mystic throne.

As each ambassador advanced and made his salaam, the organs pealed forth a triumphal march, and as he rose from the ground the kettledrums crashed a sonorous welcome. The Chancellor then addressed the ambassador, and inquired of the health of the Sovereign or Chief whom he represented, and the ceremonial compliments of friendship and congratulation were duly recited. Then the golden lions around the throne were made to utter sounds in imitation of a roar of the beast by an ingenious mechanism, which was nothing but the stop of an organ concealed beneath the floor. To Eric and to the untutored envoys of the North, the sounds issuing from the throats of the lions seemed little less than miraculous. To the citizens of Constantinople, with whom the wind organ and other instruments of the kind were familiar, the mechanical roar of the lions on the throne and the twittering of the golden birds in the canopy above, which was also a favourite device, had ceased to be anything but a useful toy, that amused the groundlings and amazed the barbarians.

The envoy of the Caliph was succeeded by a prelate dispatched from old Rome by the Pope (or Anti-Pope), Leo VIII., who

was struggling amidst horrors of every sort to dispossess the infamous Octavian claiming to be Pope John XII. Nicephorus, whose detestation of the degraded and servile Papacy was boundless, had been persuaded with difficulty to receive the opponent and rival of the ferocious murderer who now desecrated the Latin see. Basil and the astute Council of the Empire had warned their proud Chief not to rebuff the candidate for the Chair of Saint Peter, who was chosen by the all-powerful Otto I. of Germany and Italy. Nicephorus listened to the hollow congratulations of the Italian prelate in silence, and directed his Chancellor to reply to them with the best grace he could assume. The Roman prelate was followed by envoys from Venice, Amalphi, and the Dukes of Beneventum and Capua, who still admitted a shadowy bond of vassalage to the successor of Justinian at Byzantium.

The Italian envoys were succeeded by a crowd of deputies from various nations, tribes, and princelets north of the Ister and the Euxine sea, or such as lay beyond the Eastern frontier of the Empire. They were first Patzinaks, then Russ; then Chazars, Alans, and "Turks," or Hungarians, as we call them to-day. All were in uncouth and picturesque native costumes, shaggy skins, tall and pointed headgear, and strange ornaments. They brought rich presents of various sorts, embroidered garments, embossed arms, enamelled vases, horses, performing bears, and white boar hounds, which were paraded in the court outside—then announced with much solemnity, and received with equal curiosity and interest.

The long reception was continued for hours as the envoys were presented from the Kings of Armenia proper, the dwellers around Mount Ararat and the plains of Lake Van; from the Abasgians and Georgians of the Caucasus, the Lazi, and the Chief of the Iberians, who had been honoured with the right to assume the Byzantine title of Curopalates. Long before the stream of introductions had ended, with its ever-varying changes of language, costume, and manner, the young Scandinavian had been quite lost in the babel of tongues and the moving panorama before his eyes. The impression had been fully driven into his open mind, which the subtle politicians of Constantinople ever sought to extend—the impression of the world-wide relations of the Roman Empire, and its claim to be the centre of power, culture, and Christian civilisation. It was the policy embodied by Constantine Born-in-the-Purple in the

fifty-three chapters of his work *On the Administration of the Empire*, which he so laboriously—and so uselessly—prepared for the instruction of his feckless son.

There is a pathos to-day as we read the dedication and preface to this work, recalling as it does so much profound State policy, and such wasted hopes. "*Constantine, by grace of Christ the King Everlasting, Emperor of the Romans, these to his only son, Romanus, crowned of God and Born-in-the-Purple, Emperor.*" He begins :—"A wise son rejoices the heart of his father, and an affectionate father has delight in a thoughtful son. Now, therefore, my son, listen to my words ; and if you take to heart these lessons you will be counted as wise amongst the thoughtful, and as thoughtful amongst the wise. The people will bless thee, and many nations shall call thee fortunate. Take to heart that which it behoves thee to understand, so shalt thou wield the helm of this Empire like a wise ruler. And do thou, O Lord my God, whose heavenly kingdom is indestructible and everlasting, vouchsafe to guide in the right way this my son whom I have begotten by Thy grace." Alas ! the bright youth so beloved and so promising was guided rather in the wrong way by Theophano, by Bringas, by Chærina, and many devils like unto them, into the bottomless pit where he lay the scorn of after ages.

At the very end of the audience a scene of extraordinary violence roused the whole Hall to a state of wild excitement. The envoys of the Sovereign of Bulgaria, the Tsar Peter, had the right, as the Tsar was allowed the title of Basileus, to be presented before all other foreign ambassadors. To-day they had been purposely kept to the last, in spite of their remonstrances and indignation. Peter, when nearly forty years before he had succeeded to the throne of his father, the powerful Symeon, had made a treaty of amity with the Byzantine kingdom, and had married a grand-daughter of the Emperor Lecapenus, a cousin of Romanus II. By this treaty, the Bulgarian Sovereign was entitled to receive a yearly subsidy in consideration of his protecting the Empire from the incursions of the Magyars on the other side of the Danube. The Bulgarian kingdom, now extended from Belgrade to Adrianople, which under Symeon had been a terrible incubus to Constantinople, had become weak and peaceful under Peter, and a docile imitator of the arts and manners of Byzantium. The subsidy was regularly paid ; but the Bulgarian monarchy had been

little able to restrain the incursions of the Danubian raiders. To all the remonstrances of the Empire they alleged their own weakness. Nicephorus in council had resolved to refuse any further payment; and, indeed, he had secretly decided on a policy which should bring the Bulgarian kingdom to its knees by force of arms.

When at last admitted to the Hall of audience, the Bulgarian envoys committed the imprudence of adding to the formal compliments to the new Basileus the exasperating demand for payment of the annual subsidy, which they spoke of as "the tribute they had been sent to claim." Nicephorus, who wanted but a pretext of the kind to justify a rupture with the kingdom, rose from his throne, and in a tone of indignation, which he had no need to feign, for the very word "tribute" had roused him to ungovernable passion, he broke out thus :—"Foul shame would it be to us Romans, to us who in arms have driven before us every enemy who has dared to meet us, if we consent to pay 'tribute' as if we were slaves buying their freedom by coin—aye, pay tribute to a horde of Scythians—this miserable and unclean tribe of barbarians."

This extraordinary outburst, so unusual in a man as taciturn and as self-controlled as Nicephorus, electrified the audience; for only the Privy Councillors, and but few of them, knew of the Emperor's settled purpose to bring on a war with the Tsar Peter.

Then the Emperor, kindling with his own passion, in a voice of thunder that he never used in public councils, turned to his aged father, Bardas, as if to recall some by-gone incident of the Lecapenian usurpers, and said: "What on earth do these Moesians mean, my father, by talking about tribute as due to them from Rome? 'Tribute,' do they say? What, Sir, am I not your own true-born son? Am I, the August Emperor of the Romans, to be a tributary—the tributary, forsooth, of a pitiful and ungodly tribe?"

The audience held their breath in awe. The Bulgarian envoys cowered.

"Here," roared Nicephorus, "Ushers, bring your rods and drive these fellows from our presence."

Nicephorus was now choking with rage, and attempted no longer to restrain himself.

"Be off with you!" he cried hoarsely; "go, tell your master, whose food they say is leather and whose garments are the

hides of his own cattle, go back and tell him that the mighty and irresistible Basileus of the Romans is now about to march from his own country into his, and he will himself bring the tribute that is demanded of him—tribute that your people will little care to have. Now learn, slaves as you are, with slaves for your fathers and your grandsires, learn to address the Sovereign of the Romans as your lord and master, and never dare in this Palace to talk to him about tribute, as if he were a caitiff and a serf."

The Emperor closed the audience, and the Hall was forthwith emptied. Excited groups gathered outside to discuss the meaning of it all. No one was more amazed than Eric; and meeting the General Bardas Skleros in the throng he ventured to ask him what it portended.

"It portends," said Bardas quietly, "that war will be declared against the Bulgarian kingdom this very day. Rome in her hour of victory will not suffer these savages to threaten our very existence from the passes of the Hœmus. We will crush this Bulgarian kingdom. The Emperor crosses their frontier to-morrow at the head of the advanced army. In ten days we shall reach their so-called capital on the northern side of the mountains. I am to command a brigade, and you shall be on my staff."

So Eric began his service in the long secular duel between Bulgarian and Byzantine kingdoms—a duel wherein he himself was destined to play so heroic a part, a duel wherein the child Basil who had witnessed the rebuff of the envoys of King Peter was destined to earn his title of "Slayer of the Bulgarians."

CHAPTER XXI

ISLAM AND CROSS

The sun was high over the Asian Olympus, bathing in its glow the calm waters of the Propontis and the rocky islets that we now call the Islands of the Princes. The islet nearest to Byzantium, and within a few miles of it, still bears the name of *Prote*, or "the first" from the capital. It commands a glorious panorama of that superb scene, crowded with hills, rocks, bays, cities, and towers, as it fronts the lower opening of the Bosphorus, and the southern side of the city with its battlements, palaces, and domes.

High on a headland of the islet stood a large edifice of stone, which had once been a monastery, but for many years had served as an Imperial summer lodge, and of late was used as a ceremonial retreat for State prisoners and fallen princes. There the deposed Emperor, Romanus Lecapenus, had passed in peace the last years of his chequered career; and, since the capture of Chandax, it had served as the palace and the prison of the defeated Kouropas, or Governor of Crete, the aged Abd-el-Aziz, and his family. As he had duly gone through the abject forms of prostration before the Emperor in the Triumph at the Hippodrome, and had fully submitted himself to the conquerors, Romanus and his politic advisers had given the old hero an adequate estate, offered him senatorial rank, and the honours of a princely retreat. His submission was real and final; he had suffered his son Anemas to accept rank in the Imperial Guard, and his daughter Saphia to enter as a pupil into a nunnery, where she had acquired a perfect Greek education. Both had been baptised, and followed Christian rituals. But the old man, himself a Syed of the blood of the Prophet, stoutly refused to abandon the faith of his race, and patiently accepted the position of a State prisoner, under an honorary seclusion and military guard.

To-day he sat alone on the covered terrace of his mansion,

looking down upon the garden below, across the rippling waters, where he could see the proud towers of his conqueror, now Basileus of Rome. All was a scene of perfect peace and beauty. Trellised roses clustered in profusion round the arcades of his terrace, filling the air with perfume; violets, lilies, hyacinths, narcissi, and oleanders nestled in recesses beneath it. As the slopes, ornamented with balustrades, vases, and statues, fell downwards to the sea, they were shaded with fruit trees, pomegranates, acacias, cedars, and ilex. And at the bottom, where lounged on formal sentry a huge Varangian guardsman, an avenue of cypresses half concealed the garden wall.

The old Kouropas mused in silence, his white beard flowing down over his embroidered *khaftan*, for he retained his Saracen dress and habits. His work was done, and he waited in peace for the summons of Allah; pondering on the inscrutable decrees which seemed to be confounding on all sides the hopes of Islam, since the fortunes of Rome had passed to the hand of the invincible Nicephorus Phocas. As he mused, his daughter stole gently in upon her father to see if he were sleeping in a siesta, or had any need of her help. She was a sweet girl of seventeen, tall, elegant, of olive tint, with the full, dark eyes of her race. Sophia, for she adopted the Greek spelling of her name with her change of habits, after five or six years of training in the capital, was now in every sense a Byzantine, and wore the embroidered silk robes of a lady of the Court.

"What can I do for you, my dearest father?" she asked, in the musical tones natural to an Arab maiden.

"Nay, come and sit below my divan here, my child," he said, "and tell me of all you have seen and heard in the great city and their Sacred Palace."

The girl softly nestled down beside her father, and, looking up into his eyes, she poured out the tale of all she had seen in her recent visit to the Court. She had just returned from admission to the suite of the Princess Agatha, who had taken her to the Imperial daïs, at a reception of the foreign ambassadors. Since she left her home in Crete at the age of twelve, she had seen little beyond the cloister of the nuns of St. Basil, who had brought her up; and her girlish imagination had been profoundly impressed by all she had seen and heard. "Never could she have believed any city was so vast," she said; "such endless crowds in the streets, such magnificent halls, corridors,

terraces, and gardens, to which those of *Prote* were a mere toy. And the long lines of soldiers in splendid uniforms, father, and the Danubian cavalry on their chargers, lining the streets—tens of thousands of mailed giants, all as big and fierce as that fair-haired Varangian there below in the garden—and the organs and choirs in the Hall—and the magnificent robes of the Emperor and his Court, and his Imperial Guard—the Immortals—in gilt mail—and Anemas was there, on duty, and looked the most like a soldier of them all."

"Ah!" said the old Emir, with a soft, sad smile, "it is natural that you young ones should be dazzled with the power and splendour of Roum. Allah has sorely chastened the rebellious people of Islam, whose quarrels and treasons reach upwards to the throne of grace. In His mercy and His wisdom He has decreed to give victory to the Nazarene—victory for a time—His will be done. I submit to it for me and mine. His inscrutable purposes may bring together all His children in the end."

"Father!" said the girl, with a solemnity beyond her years, "if you could only enter into the great Church of the Holy Wisdom, and, whilst the choir chant their 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' look up to the figures of Christ, the Saviour, and the Mother of God, you would feel that it is not false when they say that the faith of the Cross is a spirit of Love, Mercy, and Reconciliation, and that it offers a new heaven to us poor women, and makes us in religion the true peers and helpmates of men!"

Struck by a tone so strange in a Saracen girl, by the earnestness of his daughter's appeal, the old Chief turned to his child with a searching look, and said, "But you have no thought, my best beloved one, of remaining for life in that convent, of becoming what they call a bride of Christ?"

"Never will I take the veil—I am not worthy—I should never be at peace there," she replied, with deep emphasis, but in broken sentences, "never!" And as the old man searched her look, a soft blush seemed to show itself in her olive cheek. Silence followed, and both of them thought.

"But, oh! how sweet, and good, and wise is the Lady Agatha," the girl suddenly resumed; "she has taught me so much, helped me in all things, and made me feel as if I were a sister—one of her own faith and race. She knows by heart the Greek poems of Homer, both those about Troy and about Ithaca, of Achilles and Priam, and of Odysseus and Penelope,

and Hector and Andromache; and yesterday she recited part of the tragedy of Œdipus at Colonus. She is so sweet, and thoughtful, and brave, after all she had to bear. And, father, I am to be one of her bridesmaids when she is married next month, if the Empress will consent."

"And whom is she about to marry?" asked the Chief carelessly.

"Why, don't you know, father, it is the Lord Basil Digenes, the Warden of the Marches, the favourite lieutenant and friend of the Emperor!"

"What! the son of the Emir of Edessa, he who struck us so hard at Chandax," said the old Chief, with a groan. "Yes! yes! he who was saved by the daughter of Ben-Senoussi in prison, and who saved her in the great defeat. So the blood of the Prophet of Mecca after all is to be mingled with the blood of the Constantines of Roum. It is the will of Allah! Let us bow to it with reverence and submission."

The old Emir rose and, going to his prayer-carpet, turned towards the tomb of the Prophet, devoutly prostrated himself, and performed his mid-day devotions.

The girl meanwhile drew aside in silence, crossing herself, and fingering her own chain and cross, she uttered fervent prayers to the Mother of God.

When Abd-el-Aziz returned to his divan, she took his hand, kissed it, and said, "Father, does it give you a pang to think that one of our people, if truly converted to the faith of the Cross, should mate with a follower of Christ? What would you say if my brother Anemas took him a wife from the Byzantine Court?"

"What Allah decrees it is not for us to gainsay," said the Emir, somewhat oracularly. "The Warden of the Marches is a noble soldier and a true knight, be his faith what it may. But I thought he might have wedded the Lady Fatima, whom he saved, and who saved him from death."

"He was born and bred a Roman and a Christian," she said, "and he loved the Lady Agatha before she was my age. I saw him at the Court reception, looking every inch a hero and a prince, along with his two lieutenants, who seemed worthy of such a place."

"And who are they?" asked the Chief quickly. "Anemas, I know, is one, but who is the other?"

"Do you not know?" she answered at last, distinctly blush-

ing as her father watched her; "the other is the young Norwegian prince, just promoted to be colonel in the Imperial Guard."

"And is he, too, Roman and Christian?" asked her father promptly.

"He is high in honour with the Emperor, and was baptised as a youth. He has seen battle in five countries, for all that he is but four-and-twenty. He is the tallest of all these battle-axe guardsmen, and as fair-skinned as the fairest lady of the Court. But he can hardly speak Greek yet, and does not look in the least like a Roman or a Greek. He has blue eyes and long hair, of the colour of silk from the cocoon. And his battle-axe is so enormously heavy that when he let me take it in my hand to feel its weight it fell to the ground with a crash," the girl rattled on.

"Have you spoken with him, my daughter?" the old man peremptorily asked.

"Once," she said, "in the Open Court, as we came from the Magnaura; I was with the Lady Agatha, when the Warden and his officers came up, and Anemas presented to me his young comrade in arms. He bowed and smiled, and said nice things in his broken Greek, but he looked so tremendous in his golden coat of mail, and his casque and plume, that I could hardly answer him, father," she murmured; and, as the sire still looked at her, she blushed again.

"And did you see the famous Empress?" asked the father, wishing to make the girl talk of other things.

"Oh yes! the crash of the battle-axe, when I let it drop on the marble pavement, amused the royal circle. The little boy princes laughed aloud, and Basil cried out that girls should not handle weapons, and the Empress stepped forward and flashed upon me with her great eyes, and asked who I was. She is the most beautiful woman in the world. Those beside her look like slaves. But when she stared at me with her imperious look, I felt that I should faint, if Anemas had not taken my arm and led me away. Father, there is nothing in all Rome so lovely, so bewitching, so terrible!"

"And she is absolute mistress of our Conqueror. Allah, the Just, the Merciful, Thy stricken people will be avenged at last!"

Here the conversation of father and daughter was interrupted by the entrance of Anemas himself. The old Emir's son was

now about five-and-twenty, of the finest Arab type—spare, sinewy, and finely proportioned. His limbs, hands, and feet were delicate and supple. His features were sharply cut, handsome, and intelligent; the tint, a pure brown, with keen, black eyes, and a short, curled beard of jetty hue. He resembled the Lord Warden, but was slighter and darker, for he was of pure Fatimite descent, and had no European blood in his veins. He wore his uniform as an officer of the bodyguard, and bore himself as what he was, a brilliant soldier of that splendid and renowned corps.

He greeted his father with profound respect and affection, for, Roman and Christian as he had become, he held fast to the ceremonial traditions of his ancient race. He kissed his sister, and, by a look, encouraged her to leave them for a conference alone.

"Father," said the gallant youth, standing before his sire's divan in an attitude of deep respect and affection, "I am come to ask your blessing and to claim your advice. I was preparing to be ordered with my own corps on service in the new Bulgarian war, and I burned to show these proud Byzantines that a son of Abd-el-Aziz can hold his own with the bravest swords of Rome. For three years I have worn the Imperial uniform, but have never yet seen action in their ranks. They shall see the son of the great Emir challenge to single combat the foremost champion in the enemies' host. And the name of Anemas shall live in the annals of Byzantine glory."

"Go, my son," the old man broke in, "go and prove yourself a true soldier of the race of Ali. Even in the uniform of our conquerors you will do honour to our blood."

"But, alas! my father, there is an obstacle to my joining my corps. The Emperor has need of some diplomatic relations with the Fatimite Caliph of Kairouan. You know that, after the disasters of the Imperial armies and fleet in Sicily, and the death of the Emperor's cousin at Rametta, the general-in-chief, Nicetas, was taken prisoner, and has been detained by Al Muizz, the Caliph, in El Mehdia, on the African coast. Nicephorus ardently desires peace with both Caliphs of Kairouan and of Cordova, as all three kingdoms are closely pressed by the growing power of Otto, the Teuton Emperor of the West. And he is anxious to obtain the ransom of his beloved officer and friend, Nicetas. The Embassy to Muizz is to be headed by the Patrician Nicholas. But they designate me, as a descend-

ant of the Prophet, to be his secretary and second, and *grata persona*, to a Fatimite Sovereign. As an officer of the guard, I cannot refuse such a command. But if I go to Africa, I shall lose all chance of joining the Bulgarian campaign. I come to beg you, father, to petition the Emperor that he may employ my sword in war, and not my tongue in diplomatic wrangles."

"You are young, my son," said the old Chief, in a meditative tone, as if weighing the future in his mind, "you will have ample opportunities of meeting in battle these barbarians of the North—your day of glory may come—ah! only too soon it may be, for your father's peace—but the opportunity of seeing our own people again on the African coast is not to be lost. It will be noble revenge for me that our conqueror has need of my son to restore his honour, and to rescue his commander from a Saracen prison. You will never have such a mission again. You have twenty years yet to fight the Bulgars. No! go to Kairouan, and take to the Caliph there a message from a Roman prison, that the defeated Emir of Crete does not despair of Islam!"

The son submitted, and took a dutiful and loving farewell of his sire; and, seeing his sister in the terrace below, he hurried forth to give her his news. The young Sophia, who now had but dim memories of her life as a Saracen child of the hareem, was far more truly converted to Rome and to the Cross than her brother, and had absorbed the religion of the Virgin Mother with all the ecstatic fervour of a Christian girl. Her keen intelligence, and her experience of the Sacred Palace, showed her the importance such a mission would prove to her brother, her father, and all the survivors of Crete. She warmly pressed her brother to make the most of his good fortune, and by no means to attempt any escape from the task.

Long and tenderly the brother and sister poured out their hearts to each other, till at last Sophia found courage to say, "Brother, I too have a mission for you in the Far West. There is another Caliphate in Andalusia—how many more Caliphs there may be in Asia and in Africa I know not—but Hakim, the new Caliph of Cordova, whose ambassadors are now in the City, is on terms of amity with Rome. At his Court still lives, in strict seclusion, as a Saracen girl must do, Fatima, the daughter of Ben-Senoussi, my own dearest cousin, from whom I have had, as I have told you, sad but loving greetings. Go from Africa to Spain with the Embassy about to start, under

Theodosius the Deacon and Michael the secretary; obtain a place in their mission, but contrive a meeting with Fatima. I will trust you with presents from me. Urge her from me to come to visit us here in my father's mansion. I long to see her. I yearn to try if she can be led to see how much a woman gains when she accepts the Cross, and learns to pray at the altar of the Mother of God."

"It is impossible. She would not see me—she would not listen to a word from me, if she did see me. It is impossible. Sister, say no more," said the young guardsman, with an air of dejection.

"Anemas, you have not ceased to love her? You loved her, you have told me, when you were both of the same age, and I remember how fit to be loved she was."

"Yes! she was kind, good, merciful, but she never really loved me, much as we had been together. But from the hour she saw the Roman prisoner her cousin, the Lord Basil Digenes, she could think of no one but of him, and for his sake she has lived in solitude ever since."

"He will have been married to Princess Agatha long before you can reach Spain. Seek her again, Anemas, urge your own love, and when she hears of this marriage she will listen. Bring her to me. Anemas, she shall be your bride, or else the bride of Christ!"

Anemas was dispatched on his mission to the Caliph of Kairouan, Al Muizz, then at the height of his glory. The Roman Embassy, after touching at Messina and Syracuse, crossed to the port of El Mehdia, then in its era of prosperity and power. The Roman envoys were amazed to find on the African coast another Saracen kingdom, almost as splendid and as flourishing as the Caliphate of Andalusia itself. The docks of the African seaport were crowded with ships from Syria, Alexandria, Sicily, and Spain, with galleys from Venice, Pisa, and Amalphi. The palaces of Muizz and of his chief Emirs were almost as rich and luxurious as those of Abderrahman himself at Cordova. The culture of the Fatimite Court of Kairouan was not equal to that of the Ommeyades of Spain, and the civilisation of the African people was not so advanced as that of the long-settled Cordovan dynasty of the West. But the military energy and movement of troops was even more conspicuous. For, at this very season, the Caliph was preparing the vast expedition which a few years afterwards was destined

to march into Egypt, and, under the famous commander, Jouhar, to transfer the dynasty to the banks of the Nile, and to found at Kâhira, the modern city of Cairo. It was the preparation for this great revolution in the world of Islam which the young Anemas was able to witness.

The mission was successful; peace was made between Muizz and Nicephorus, for both had other enemies to meet and other conquests to win. And Anemas, in returning, adopted his sister's advice, and had no difficulty in finding an honourable welcome in the Andalusian capital of Hakim II. As the son of Abd-el-Aziz, the old Kouropas, and as the brother of Sophia, he had at last obtained an interview with Fatima, who lived with her sister and aunts in a retired villa that had been assigned to them in the mountains of the Sierra Morena, north of Cordova.

Fatima received Anemas in the terrace of their garden looking out towards the east upon the mountains of Grenada. She was accompanied by her young sister, as if she had resolved not to listen to a word of love. Fatima was now in the full maturity of her beauty, to which a life of meditation and solitude had given a peculiar aspect of spiritual refinement. She had always refused that close veiling and seclusion of women which had begun to spread over the Moslem world. She asked rapid questions as to her dear Sophia, whom she remembered almost as a child, as to the aged Emir, who had so stoutly defended Crete, the nature of his imprisonment, and the treatment that the Cretan captives had received at Byzantium. "Was dear little Sophia really a Christian, and about to be a nun? Was she happy? Had she quite forgotten her father's faith and people? Was the Kouropas held in honour, and was he at peace, and was he satisfied with his lot?"

These and such questions she eagerly poured out to her young compatriot from the Byzantine Court.

Anemas answered her questions truthfully, and at length. And, in turn, he put to her some similar questions of his own.

"Was she satisfied with her life in a Spanish retreat? Would she live and die in a mountain hermitage? Was this the destiny of Islam? Were not the followers of the Prophet as much divided amongst themselves as the followers of Christ? Could true believers in the Koran still feel that Allah was purposed to lead them ever on to victory? Could she wonder if a soldier felt that true religion taught him to serve his commander and

be faithful to the standard under which he was sworn, and to the land in which God had destined him to live? Did she not think that an officer was doing his duty if he gave his life to his service, and left the mysteries of Heaven to the Imams of Islam, or to the Patriarchs of Christ?"

"There is but one God," she said, with profound earnestness; "I know but one God, and I care not if He be named the Trinity or Allah. I have lived so long in this Andalusian Caliphate; I have seen enough of the Romans of the Empire." She sighed as she uttered that name. "I have seen and heard enough to know that Christendom and Islam have each much that is God-like and good, and much that is of Sheitan and evil. This splendid capital of Cordova is in many things, in most things, the counterpart of Byzantium, as rich, as luxurious, as corrupt, as elegant, as turbulent. These Ommeyades here execrate the Fatimites: Abbasides from the first contend with Kharijis. There are as many sects amongst Mussulmans as there are amongst Christians—as many dynasties, as many wars. Bagdad, Damascus, Haleb, Antioch, Edessa, Fostat, Kairouan, Andalusia, war on each other as often as Byzantine, Bulgarian, Lombard, Calabrian, Frank, or Saxon. Whether it be Allah and His Prophet, or Christ and His Mother, who inspire these rivalries and combats, I know not. All that I know is that it is not the one God."

"Does not Christendom, with its culture and its freedom, its poetry, its art, its ritual, offer, at least to women, a richer, nobler life? So my sister, Sophia, asserts, and longs to show you. Oh! that you could be persuaded to visit her in my father's house at *Prote*, and see our Byzantine world, our Christian Church!"

"The Byzantine world," she said sadly, "differs not so very much from our Cordovan world. It may have more art, more ceremony, more priests and nuns, I dare believe, but it has less poetry, less science, less philosophy, less learning. Its women have a freer life—it may be a happier and a wiser. Its men are less chivalrous, and faithful, and resolute. There may be more saints in Christendom; there are more heroes in Islam."

"Has not Christendom its heroes too?" he asked suddenly, looking at her with passionate devotion.

"God forbid that I should doubt it," she said, with a deep sigh. Silence ensued, and each could feel the tremor in the soul of the other. Rapturous memories and cruel sorrows crowded

through the mind of the woman. Eager hopes rose in the mind of the man. They gazed upon each other in silence. At length, as she looked at the young chief, Fatima saw again in the young Anemas the strange blending of the Saracen and the Roman, that figure which, for long years, had been the warrior-saint of her inmost dreams and devotions. Anemas, too, was now spiritually a Digenes himself, with the heroic temper of Saracen and of Crusader compounded in one.

"Can I never hope to utter those words which have been on my lips in my long journey to this land?" he said, and, seizing her hand, he held her close to him, gazing into her eyes with passion and devotion. "Can I hope?"

She suffered her hand to remain for an instant in his grasp. "It is too late in my life for me to change my creed—my home —my people. It is too late in life for me to think of happiness. I will live and die here a lonely woman, who has known too much sorrow to dream of being happy, or of making any one happy." She paused, and, looking at the young soldier again with tender compassion, she added, "I must think over my message which I mean to send to your sister and your father. Yes! I will see you again before we part."

CHAPTER XXII

THE STARS IN THEIR COURSES

It was midnight of a dark and still evening on the Bosphorus, and peace had, for the most part, descended upon the great city; the lamps in the houses were extinguished, and the tramp of the sentries and the challenges of the watch alone were heard. The harbour lights in the Golden Horn, at the point of Keras, burned steadily, and across the straits shone the Imperial light-house of Chrysopolis. Within the walls of the Sacred Palace the central Pharos stood forth in its lofty tower, and cast its glare far out into the Propontis. Out of the gloom there passed, within the circle of its rays, a light skiff rowed by stout boatmen, wherein were seated two men, closely wrapped in long, dark cloaks, which served as a disguise. One was blindfolded, and was patiently listening to the instructions of his companion and guide.

Psellus, a cubicular attendant attached to the person of the Basilissa, was explaining in a low voice the business on which his charge, Aaron Ben Ammon, had been summoned to exercise his art. Aaron was a Jew, originally of Alexandria, in Egypt, who had studied astrology, necromancy, alchemy, and many of the black arts, first from heretical anchorites of the Thebais, and afterwards in Bagdad and Damascus, as well as in Armenian and Byzantine cloisters. His profound learning in the casting of horoscopes, in extracting prophecies by occult sorceries, in the procuring of love-philtres, and occasionally, it was whispered, even more insidious drugs, had gained him a sinister fame, which made him in great demand in the Byzantine world of fashion, whilst it made his profession one of personal risk. The growing taste for these unholy experiences amongst the great ladies of the Empire had caused the Government of late to be strict in putting the law in motion, whilst the Patriarch was even more keen to punish the adepts of these arts by the resources within the power of the Church. Aaron, therefore,

had willingly submitted to be carried disguised and blindfolded to an interview with a person unknown, in a spot that he would not be able to reveal.

"Most learned doctor," said Psellus, as he slipped into the hand of Aaron a heavy purse of bezants, "a lady of wealth, whose name, abode, and position you will forbear to seek if you value your life, and who will double and treble this largess if you act with absolute discretion, will herself explain to you in person her purpose, and she desires to receive from your own hand the horoscopes of those persons of whose nativities I have already given you the exact day and hour. You are now to bring the result of your astral investigations."

"Lead me to her ladyship; her will is my law. Silence, discretion, disguise, are as needful to me as to my client—aye, much more so, were it not that Ashmodaï watches over the lives of those whose eyes he has opened."

Psellus listened intently to these last words of the astrologer, for part of his instructions had been that on the return journey, if the sign had been given, he was to have the Jew drowned in the Bosphorus, to secure his absolute discretion. They now passed into the Imperial harbour of Boucoleon, and, mooring the boat to the quay, after giving the countersign to the guard, proceeded to ascend the path up from the sea towards the Pharos, which now shone over the Chrysotriclinium of the Imperial Palace. Guiding the Jew with his left hand, Psellus drew him past the chapel of Elias and the oratory of Saint Clement, to the corner of the terrace of the New Basilica. There a small robing-room stood in the great garden surrounding the New Church, and communicated by a winding staircase with the upper rooms of the Sacred Palace. Psellus now removed the bandage from Aaron's eyes, placed him in a couch, and desired him to wait the approach of his client. Nor was there anything visible in this garden dressing-room to distinguish it from an ordinary apartment in any of the mansions of the city or suburbs.

Presently a majestic and graceful woman glided into the room —she was wrapped in a great black cloak, and closely veiled. She motioned to the attendants to withdraw, and to the astrologer to approach.

"Most learned doctor of astral science," she said, in her clear, soft voice of command, "you have brought me the calculations your learning has enabled you to make as to the

future of the persons whose nativities were supplied to you?"

"Your Eminence shall be satisfied. The horoscopes of both are the most wonderful that our science has ever revealed to me. They indicate most amazing changes of life, incredible splendour of ascent, and signs of imminent peril."

"Call me simply Lady—I am no more," said Theophano, "and give me the details of each horoscope."

The astrologer was a swarthy, spare old Hebrew, with hooked nose and fine features, distinguished by eyes of intense keenness, though they had a sinister aspect like those of a trapped beast. Theophano watched him behind her yashmak as closely as he did her, for ever and anon he stole furtive glances at her, hoping to penetrate her secret.

"The first whose nativity I have calculated is that of one born fifty-six years, one hundred and thirteen days, and seven hours, from this moment. It was a birth under the sign of the Lion at an hour charged with vast possibilities in the future. At that instant, the Zodiac was moved by portentous lights, and the earth shook with tremors, as I have ascertained in the records of our art that are stored in the great observatory at Antakia in Syria. There lived and studied the mighty seer, Mohammed Ben Djafar of Batan, my ever-revered lord and master."

"But what has been the horoscope of this Child of miracle and wonder?" she said hurriedly, caring little for the pompous claims of the Jew.

"'The right ascension into the mansion of life and glory' tells of a career of battle, victory, and fame, which, at the hour wherein we are, forms one unbroken career of success and triumph."

"Most learned doctor," said the Empress peremptorily, "what are the signs of the future? What is passed and gone we all know without the science of Mohammed of Batan, whom here we call Albatenius, and without the aid of your most profound self, Doctor Ben Ammon. What of the future of this person, I ask?"

"Madam, I hesitate to impart to you what I have found," said the Jew, with a cunning look as he sought her eyes; "it is terrible. The declination to the 'house of death' stands close to the right ascension to the 'house of life.'"

Theophano gave a sudden start in spite of her self-control. Her piercing eyes, which she unveiled to watch the Jew, gleamed

with a light of joy. She stretched out her hand from her wrappings to take the scroll whereon the astrologer had marked the rise and fall of the star record. As she put out her arm, the keen astrologer noticed the flash of a superb armlet of rubies, such as he well knew could only be found in the Imperial treasury. And now, having his first suspicions confirmed, he felt sure that he recognised the wonderful eyes of Anastasia, the daughter of Craterus, the Laconian. Years ago, Ben Ammon had frequent dealings with Craterus, whom he had supplied with amulets, charms, trinkets, and gems from Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia, and had often noticed the beauty of the girl, and, indeed, had cast her horoscope with a brilliant future. Aaron now felt sure that he was confronted by the Empress herself. Astrologers, in ancient as in modern ages, have been far more physiognomists than astronomers; and, in his further conversation, Aaron thought only to indulge the humours or the passions of his sovereign, and repeated the jargon of his "science," only to mislead and excite her.

"Lady," he said, with profound solemnity, watching her expression intently, "it is my duty to tell you that a second year cannot pass from this hour before this person shall find death—death, sudden, alas! and shameful." She gleamed again, and her frame thrilled. Aaron continued in the same voice of a prophet. "He—or is it she?—will die hated, unlamented, and despised. The stars so reveal to us the Book of Fate." Silence ensued.

"And now, what of the second nativity you have calculated?" she asked at length.

"It is even more wonderful than that of the first. For twenty-nine years, less three months and thirteen days, the stars have shone in the ascendant. Born under the culmination of Venus, coincident with her superior conjunctions at every stage of life, this horoscope is plainly that of a woman, of the most beautiful woman on God's earth, a woman whose beauty has been one long triumph, with but one darker sign in all its course."

"And that is what?" she asked, with an audible gasp.

"Lady, I hesitate to tell it; there is at this very time an ominous sign. The gorgeous planet Venus, who rules the sky by her brilliance, is passing now from east elongation towards inferior conjunction. She is now being obscured by too close attendance on a lower and less honourable star."

Theophano held her breath. "What comes after?" she whispered.

"Lady, the synodic period of Venus is almost complete, and it portends a new epoch of effulgence. This woman, for these conjunctions can belong only to a woman, is about to free herself from an unworthy planetary connection, and will soon ascend again into a house of glory and joy still greater than before."

"When shall that be?" she gasped.

"Lady, it may be retarded by events, or it may be hastened by art."

"And what is destined to be this superior conjunction of which you spoke?"

"Lady, the lore of astral combinations does not reveal such things. But palmistry may give signs which the constellations disdain to show. Deign to let me trace the lines in the palm of your hand."

Flinging aside all disguises, Theophano, in her eagerness, put her palm in his. He bent over it with an air of profound mystery—muttering, "The line of Life, the line of Love, the line of Strength. Lady, these lines make it manifest that you are mated to one unworthy of you, and that your happiness will not be assured till you are the bride of one who is more youthful, more glorious, more loving."

"But when—with whom—how will it be brought about?" she gasped.

"It is not revealed to man or to woman when, with whom, or how happiness can be won. But art may assist; it may hasten; it may cut the knot which binds us to misery. Here, lady, are two rare drugs, each worth a king's ransom, which I had from the great Abu Djafar Achmed Ben Ibrahim. One is in silver, one is wrapped in lead. The silver charm is a love-philtre, the leaden packet will relieve one of an enemy. No man on this side of the Orontes has these medicines or ever has had. Nothing less than the jewel on your arm to-night would buy them," said Aaron, with a gleam of avarice in his eye.

"Give them to me," she said, in a cold, firm voice, and slipped the ruby armlet from her wrist into his trembling fingers.

"Farewell, learned doctor," she added, with cruel abruptness; "guard yourself with care, for the city is full of cut-throats." And she summoned Psellus and her guards. "Conduct the

learned doctor to his rest, and be careful that *he sleeps soundly to-night.*"

"Ashmodaï, my lord and master, guards his servant, Lady," said Aaron, fawning, and yet with a certain subdued vein of menace.

Psellus looked steadily at his mistress, with inquiry for the concerted sign. She did not blench, but repeated again, "*See that he sleeps soundly to-night.* I am sure that Ashmodaï longs to see his own." She passed swiftly behind a curtain up the winding stair, and Aaron allowed himself to be blindfolded with a heavy shawl, over which Psellus and his assistants slipped a stout silken noose. This rapid manœuvre Aaron, busy with the fingering of his priceless rubies, neither saw nor felt. Then they two passed into the night, and the skiff shot away noiselessly into the blackness of the waters of Propontis.

As the morning dawned, some fishermen, dragging their net for tunny off the rock we call the "Tower of Leander," pulled up the body of an old man clad in a loose Oriental gabardine. The city police found in his wallet a purse of one hundred bezants, and also a bracelet of rubies of the rarest water. At noon the bazaars rang with the gossip of the hour, that a thief, who had broken into one of the Imperial chambers, and stolen some jewels, had been caught, and flung over the southern battlements, but some insisted that he had been drowned in trying to escape with his plunder. The next day a new crime and a fresh scandal occupied the Forum and the wine-shops, whilst Aaron Ben Ammon "slept soundly" for evermore, in the bosom of father Ashmodaï.

Theophano, who cared little for the mystical jargon of astrologers, necromancers, or palmists, could not free her mind from dwelling on prophecies which so curiously agreed with her inmost desires. The ascetic nature of Nicephorus, his devoutness, his zeal in the great work of the crusade to defend Christendom from Islam—all were profoundly odious to his wife, and had turned her, by rapid stages, from indifference to coldness, from coldness to contempt, and from contempt to loathing. She longed for a life of youth, adventure, gaiety, and pomp. Romanus, with all his graces, had nothing heroic about him but his passion for the chase. Nicephorus had nothing of the lover, for night and day his thoughts turned to councils of State and preparations for war. The dreams of Theophano were visions of an Ares, who flung aside his weapons when he flew to the bower of his own Aphrodite.

Whilst the Emperor was absent on his short Bulgarian expedition, he had entrusted to his Empress, the Regent, full powers of authority. And these she had used under various pretences to throw obstacles in the way of the marriage of Princess Agatha and Basil Digenes, the Lord Warden. As being a Princess of the royal house, and, indeed, after her infant nephews, an heiress presumptive to the throne, Agatha could not marry without the Imperial consent, nor, in truth, could the Lord Warden, as a great official, thwart their Majesties by acting in defiance of them. Consent had been withheld on various pretexts from time to time, and no sooner was Nicephorus across the Balkan frontier than the Empress discovered a reason of State which caused her to issue a peremptory rejection of the Warden's demand. Theophano insisted on marrying Agatha to the Magistros Sisinnios, one of the Imperial Marshals, a man of birth and wealth, and now entirely a creature of her own.

A stormy scene had just taken place between the Princess and the Empress. Agatha refused point-blank to marry any one except the Lord Warden. She insisted on knowing the grounds on which their Majesties had withdrawn the consent, which had been virtually given long ago, and on what charges the Lord Warden's suit had been rejected.

"His Imperial Majesty," said Theophano, "had now discovered the dangerous ambition which his own indulgent favour had aroused in the mind of his former favourite lieutenant. It was now seen that, in aspiring to the hand of a Basilian Princess, he was preparing a claim to the throne itself."

"It is false," retorted Agatha, with passion; "let those who make so infamous an accusation against the most loyal spirit in this Empire produce their evidence of any such thought or attempt."

"The Emperor has had his eyes opened, and his ministers will in good time produce the proofs which their vigilance has collected. He cannot suffer an officer convicted of such dangerous ambition to acquire the manifest advantage of alliance with the house of Basil."

"The Lord Warden can prove his innocence the instant he has audience of his Emperor. It will be easy to show him that his mind has been abused with monstrous calumnies."

"Agatha, child, fool, listen to me," said Theophano, with a cruel smile. "I am Empress here. No man knows when

Nicephorus will return from the war. I and my Council have resolved that Basil Digenes shall never wed a daughter of our dynasty. The throne, the lives of my young sons, would not be safe for an hour——"

"It is monstrous—it is inhuman—it is Satanic," broke out Agatha, with passion; "the sons of my own brother, am I to be their murderess?" And she sobbed with indignation and rage.

"Well, your husband might easily be their murderer. Uncles and even aunts have been known to plot against the thrones of their nephews. But listen, Agatha, there is another thing which has decided my Council. They hold that at the opening of a new Crusade against the Moslem, it would be a scandal and a danger to show the Court of Byzantium mingling the race of the Constantines and the Basils with that of a Saracen Emir."

"Mother of God," cried Agatha, in her agony, "do you hear the blasphemy and the calumnies they utter?"

"Agatha, listen to me, and cease these idle wailings and revilings," said Theophano, with cold and deliberate words. "On the third day from this you marry the Marshal Sisinnios."

"Never!" burst in Agatha.

"Then our will is that you be made a nun and confined in a convent on the coast of the Black Sea. Again I say—marry Sisinnios—or be for life a solitary bride of Christ."

"Never," she gasped. "I will choose death rather than such a marriage. I will marry none but Basil Digenes."

"Basil Digenes," said Theophano, with her cold, cruel voice, as if she enjoyed the torture she was causing, "Basil Digenes, let me inform you, is now under arrest as a traitor to his sovereigns, and will be dealt with as I and my Council direct. You know what happens to prisoners who are suspected of aspiring to the throne. You will never see the Digenes again in this world—and be very certain that he can never see you;" and she laughed a cruel, mocking laugh, such as comes from the devils when they seize their victim.

"Mother of God," shrieked Agatha, "dost thou hear this?"

"Marry Sisinnios," said Theophano hoarsely.

"None but my Basil," screamed Agatha, wild with horror and wrath.

The Empress struck the door twice with her jewelled bâton, and three black cubiculars rushed in and seized Agatha, now speechless, and almost fainting.

"Take her away, and carry out my orders," said Theophano.

"Fiend, I defy you——" shrieked Agatha, as the huge eunuchs carried her off, and closed her mouth with their unholy hands.

After this stormy interview, which took place in the privy boudoir of the Empress, Theophano sent for her tiring women, and, having had herself divested of the stately robes she had worn, she was bathed with rose-water, and had her long tresses combed and plaited. Then she was dressed in the diaphanous folds of silk gauze, which displayed to the best her magnificent form, and left free the dazzling whiteness of her neck and arms. It was little, indeed, that art could do to enhance the radiance of that countenance which the symmetry of a Greek bust, and the glow of health and life, had made a model of perfect beauty. But all that the cosmetic art of Byzantine luxury could achieve was now brought into play. And, as she watched the effect in her steel mirror, with its enamelled frame, Theophano felt conscious that she had never in her life looked so like to a goddess of the old Olympus.

"Bring in the prisoner," she said to her cubiculars, "if he has tasted the cup I sent him to drink."

Two great Palace guards accordingly led in a man heavily manacled with a chain attached to the arm of each of his guards.

"Loose all these bonds," said the Empress imperiously.

"All, Madam?" the attendants asked, as if in doubt of her meaning.

"All," she said again. "Leave him quite free." It was done. The attendants and guards stood alert and on the watch, for a State prisoner quite unbound was an experience unknown in the Sacred Palace.

"All will leave us," she said peremptorily. They looked at her with inquiry and in surprise. "Leave us quite alone. Withdraw, and close all doors," she added.

To leave the Empress alone with a young and very powerful prisoner was something strange and perilous, they thought. But she looked at them steadily till every step was gone, and all doors shut.

Theophano stood alone with Basil Digenes.

"Gallant Lord Warden," she began, in silvery tones, "our Council here, in the absence of my Lord the Basileus, have insisted on having you arrested on a charge of aiming at the

throne by pressing your claim to a marriage with the Princess Agatha."

"Madam," said the Warden, with a proud smile, "my beloved Lord and Chief knows me too well to listen to suspicions so empty and absurd."

"You will never think, Basil," she said, in her most insinuating tones, "that I who know you, I trust, quite as well as does my Lord, can personally believe such treason to be possible to the noblest hero in the armies of Rome. I know you to be the most loyal servant of your Basileus—aye, and of your Basilissa——" And she stepped forward and offered him her hand to kiss.

The guileless Warden bent on his knee, took those radiant and yet deadly fingers in his own, and put them to his lips, with the words, "From all my heart I thank thee, gracious Queen."

"You may trust to my intercession with the stern Basileus to save you from the charge of treason. Rely on my friendship, my Lord Basil, for you little know how suspicious, how capricious, how resentful, is Nicephorus Phocas. But I will save you, will protect you from his vengeance, if any mortal can."

"My chief, my friend, my sovereign, will need little persuasion the very moment he sees me before him," said the Warden, with a sudden air of disdain.

"You little know him," she said bitterly. "But the danger is too immediate to yourself. The Council have already sealed an order that endangers your life—at least, your eyes," she said, watching him as a tigress might watch a kid.

"What!" cried the Warden, with a start, "my life, my limbs, and senses? Are they mad? Do they know who I am, and who is my liege master, my comrade in a hundred fights?"

"Basil, I am your friend, and only I of those who rule here to-day. Your liberty and life are in the hands of those who rule in the absence of the Basileus himself. I can save you from their envy and their malice, but on one condition alone. There is one thing that they cannot yield, one thing wherein I could not save you."

"What is that?" he said, with a fierce air of resolution.

"You must renounce all thought of the Princess. The Council will never suffer you with your name, and fame, and birth—your glory, your invincible charm, Basil, to be allied with the sister of the late Basileus."

"Never will I renounce her, never! I will face death, imprisonment, mutilation, torture, but never will I give up my Agatha in life."

"Basil, it is too late. She has renounced you; she consents to marry the Marshal Sisinnios, and the ceremony takes place to-morrow."

"Impossible, I will not believe it; she is as true as steel, as good as a saint, as brave as a virgin martyr. I must see her, must hear this from her own lips. It is false."

"Would that I could think so, Basil, for her sake and for yours. Listen to reason, hear the truth from one who admires your glory and yearns to serve and to save you. You cannot save her, and you may destroy the noblest Roman of this Empire, which we all know you to be. Agatha, poor child, is powerless here, and can do nothing to save you, to help you, or to raise you. I have placed one soldier on the Golden Throne. He has proved unworthy of it——"

Here Basil burst out into furious words, for the Jew's drug had begun to excite and confuse his brain. Theophano drew back and fingered the poisoned stiletto she had concealed in her bosom.

"Basil," she said, in a voice of deep feeling, "he may die—he may become the hermit he desires to be—within a month. Where should Rome find a Basileus then, save in the most noble, the most splendid soldier of this realm? Where could I and my babes find a protector, a friend, a counsellor, if it be not in the hero whom a thousand bards have praised as the 'bravest of the brave,' whom all Byzantium and the Golden Palace admires—and loves—as the most brilliant cavalier in this royal Court? Basil, hear me, Rome and Rome's mistress, all that is greatest and most beautiful on earth is yours!—Say but one word, and seal it with one kiss!"

He listened like a man in an evil dream, who cannot move or speak. The drug had begun to make him delirious.

She advanced towards him, opening her white arms, that glistened with jewels, and sought to wrap him round and draw him towards her.

He gasped with shame, awe, and rage, speechless with indignation and amazement, and stupefied with the potion. He staggered backwards, shrinking from her with loathing, as from something poisonous and unclean. He stumbled back towards the door, which was violently opened behind him. And

as Digenes staggered back he fell against the Basileus himself, who rushed into the arms of his wife, shouting, "My Queen, my wife, my love, I have hurried back without notice in advance of my guard and men."

The unfortunate Digenes sank down exhausted and senseless. He was now in high fever, delirious from the effects of the potion, and the spasms of fury and amazement through which he had passed. The Silentiaries called the guard, who bore away the unconscious chief to a bed, whereon he long lay overcome with a dangerous illness, and unable to remember what had happened. Nicephorus gave strict orders to his own physicians and attendants to nurse him. He listened in silence, full of doubt and bewilderment, to the artful story poured into his ears from the ready brain of Theophano.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MARCH ON ANTIOCH

The dawn had not appeared when the peace of Byzantium was roused by a sudden commotion. The *réveille* was sounding from all the barracks of the guards. Citizens rushed from their houses to the wider streets and Forum to hear the news. The beacon fire across the Bosphorus, on the heights above Chrysopolis, was blazing in the sky. And the Palace and its precincts were bright with lamps and torches, as messengers, troops, and attendants hastened through the corridors and courts.

The young guardsman, Eric, hurrying to head-quarters, chanced in the crowd to meet his friend Symmachos, the Silentiary, attended by Leo, the historian that was to be, then a young student at college. "What does it mean?" he asked. "What does it mean?"—"Can you ask?" said Symmachos. "Do you not see the blaze of the beacon across the Bosphorus there? Do you not know that this is the signal from Cæsarea in Cappadocia that the great army of the East is ready to march and awaits the coming of the Basileus?"

"I knew the signal was expected, but I did not understand it had arrived."

"Yes!" said Symmachos, "it has come—just an hour ago, having started from the banks of the Halys about this very midnight. I have just been sent to summon General Bardas to the Palace."

"You have never seen our telegraphs at work before?" said Leo, the scholar, who was already well versed in all the machinery of the Empire. "Mount Argæus, whence this signal started, is full thirty days' march from the city. In a few hours the beacon fire has leapt across that space."

"Yes!" said Symmachos, "the Palace Pharos communicates with that of Chrysopolis. Thence it flashes to Nicomedia,

Nicæa, Dorylæum, Laodicea, till it reaches Mount Taurus, and from Taurus the concerted signals are returned."

"Does it not remind you of the famous scene of the Beacon fire from Troy, in the *Agamemnon* of our Æschylus?" said Leo, with all the conceit of a young student. "You know those glorious lines, my Lord?" he asked.

"Not I, my boy," said Colonel Eric, with a laugh; "Greek prose is too much for me as yet, and as for your Æschylus, I would rather wrestle with a Russian bear than struggle through his break-jaw lines."

"May Apollo and the Nine Muses forgive you, most terrible son of Thor and Odin. Oh! listen to these majestic verses that the poet puts in the mouth of Clytemnestra—

> "From Ida's top, Hephæstus, Lord of Fire,
> Sent forth his sign; and on, and ever on,
> Beacon to beacon sped the courier-flame.
> From Ida to the crag, that Hermes loves,
> On Lemnos; thence, unto the steep sublime
> Of Athos, throne of Zeus, the broad blaze flared.
> Thence, raised aloft to shoot across the sea,
> The moving light, rejoicing in its strength,
> Sped from the pyre of pine, and urged its way,
> In golden glory, like some strange new sun,
> Onward, and reached Macistus' watching heights."

As the young student, all aflame with his tragic enthusiasm, rolled out these lines to the bewilderment of Eric, the courtier Symmachos watched him sharply.

"Beware how you talk of Clytemnestra within sight of our Palace, my young friend, or you may be a Cassandra yourself," said he.

"Ah," said Leo, "how every line of the tragedy haunts one; of a truth, there never was, there never will be again on this earth, such a tragedy as that! But our Agamemnon, king of men, is going forth to Asia to a triumph; he is not returning home after long absence. And yet how the weird cries of the chorus ring in my ears—

> "Wherefore, for ever, on the wings of Fear
> Hovers a vision drear
> Before my boding heart? a strain,
> Unbidden and unwelcome, thrills mine ear
> Oracular of pain."

"Keep your visions in your heart, as we do," said the Silentiary sharply, "and do not let them pass your lips, or they will prove oracular of pain, indeed, and you will have no

eyes to see visions at all. But come, enough of this; our friend, the Colonel here, is not listening to you. He is staring at the crowd before the Gate of Bronze."

They pushed their way through the bystanders, who stood watching an unwonted and stirring sight. On either side of the bronze door of the Palace stood two huge Varangian battle-axemen on guard, motionless as statues. Above them, high on the face of the closed doors, hung the gilded corselet of the Emperor's armour of State, with the sword and the shield. The crowd below came and went, gazing on it with murmurs.

"And what means that?" Eric asked his guides.

"It is the ceremonial notice to his people," said Symmachos, "that the Emperor is about to march and take command of his army in person."

"An ancient custom?" asked Eric.

"From time immemorial, at least, since Theophilus the Magnificent marched forth against the children of Hagar. The rite is all exactly prescribed in the Appendix to the first *Book of Ceremonies* of our ever-revered Constantine Porphyrogennetus," said Symmachos, with an air of authority, as if that had settled the matter.

The day had now begun to break, and the streets were crowded with long lines of guards hastening to the points of embarkation. The forums were filled with eager sightseers, with caravans of beasts of burden, orderlies flying in every direction with orders, and endless processions of priests and acolytes to the shrines and miraculous oratories and temples. The main army was already gathered round Cæsarea. The intermediate camps were crowded with troops, stores, ammunition, beasts, corn, and sheep, for food. Nothing remained to be moved from Byzantium across the water, except the strong bodyguard of the Emperor, and the vast train and baggage apparatus, tents, and servitors ordained in the *Book of Ceremonies*, when a Basileus takes the field in person.

To carry all these across the straits to the Asian coast, there were gathered a fleet of transports, barges, and galleys, which crowded round the ports adjoining the Palace, and again covered the Golden Horn with their many-coloured sails and long banks of oars.

In the meantime stormy scenes had been taking place within the Sacred Palace, and, indeed, in the privy chambers of the Emperor and the Empress themselves.

To explain the situation, it is necessary to go back somewhat in time to the moment described at the close of the twentieth chapter, when Nicephorus so unexpectedly burst out against the envoys from the King of Bulgaria, and his sudden attack upon that kingdom.

The Emperor judged it unsafe to start on his Far Eastern campaign whilst leaving the Bulgarian kingdom, with all its resources and possible allies, planted within a few days' march of his capital. He silently resolved to strike down the power of so dangerous a neighbour by a sudden onslaught, of which none but two or three of his intimate Council had any warning. His unexpected rush had utterly paralysed the unwarlike Tsar Peter, who had lived all these years in a fool's contentment. Forts, towns, and stores fell into the hands of the Romans, who seemed to be making a military promenade on the Bulgarian capital. But it was no part of the policy of Nicephorus to occupy himself in the Balkan a single day after the completion of his Eastern preparations. Accordingly, he sent a mission to the young Tsar of the Ross, son of the great Tsarina Olga, and induced him, by promises and enormous bribes, to fall upon Bulgaria from the north across the Danube. Sviatoslav forced his way on. Crushed thus between Romans on the south and Russians on the north, Bulgaria lay helpless and prostrate. Thereupon Nicephorus had dashed back to Constantinople in advance of his men, as suddenly and as unexpectedly as he had begun the attack. He was now free to give himself entirely to the great campaign beyond the Taurus, the moment the fire signal should warn him that all was ready to march.

Theophano succeeded in throwing on the Privy Council the responsibility for the arrest of Digenes, and for the opposition to his marriage with Agatha. The unfortunate Warden, tossing on a bed of sickness, and quite delirious with fever, was unable to give any explanations whatever. Agatha, who was occupied intently with superintending the nursing him to life, was still ignorant of the monstrous advances that the Empress had made to Digenes. And the persecuted Princess, in her agonies of anxiety and excitement, was no match for the daring brain of Theophano. Nicephorus peremptorily cancelled the Imperial order to marry Agatha to Sisinnios, who narrowly escaped condign punishment for allowing himself to be made a party to the scheme. The formal authority was given to

the suffering Warden of the Marches to marry the Princess as soon as he could be restored to health. On her part, the noble-minded Agatha, overjoyed at her deliverance from the Palace plot, and absorbed in saving her beloved Digenes from death, forbore to torture the mind of the Emperor, at the moment of setting forth on his great campaign, with all that she knew and more that she suspected of the designs and intrigues of Theophano. And in this magnanimous resolve she was confirmed by the sudden decision of Nicephorus as to the Regency, which struck the whole Palace and its inmates with surprise, fear, or hope, according to the party each supported.

"My beloved Lord and Ever-Victorious hero," broke out the Basilissa, when at last they two were alone, and the immediate orders had been given, "well wert thou named Nicephorus, thou who bringest victory ever in thy hand! Thou returnest from a new triumph over another enemy, who treacherously professed to be our friend. But to me, thy wife, thy servant, thy lover, thou bringest back that which is to her more dear than Victory. Thou hast brought Life, and Light, and Joy—thou bringest back thyself!"

Nicephorus listened in silence with a clouded brow. At last he spoke.

"I do not know if my coming brings Joy to this Palace. I purpose that it shall bring Peace. I will do my best that it bring life at least to one who is more dear to me than any soldier in my Empire. But, you will remember that I do not come to stay. I hurried back from the Balkan on news that all was on the eve of readiness on the Taurus. Hour by hour I expect the beacon fire to flame. And twelve hours after that light I shall be in Asia."

"Oh! my Lord, my Life, say not so soon. Am I to be widowed again in so short an interval? Have you thought of all the anxieties I have suffered whilst filling your seat at the Council? Do you care nothing for all the toils that a Regent has to bear—and that Regent a weak, inexperienced woman? Cannot you imagine, dear my Lord and Master, all the loneliness that a widowed wife has to suffer in her silent chamber, in her deserted couch?"

"You will have no longer all these toils."

"What say you?" she almost shrieked. "Who can sustain the Regency in your absence, who but your wife, who

lifted you to this throne, and who alone knows all its cares, its resources, and its perils?"

"One who knew all this before you yourself were born—one who, for two generations, has been a chief bulwark of Rome—one who is honoured and beloved by every honest Roman," said Nicephorus quietly, and with a tone of decision.

"Your father, Bardas?" she gasped. "But he is decrepit with age and infirmity."

"He is wise, brave, firm, and the idol of the people. But I have named as his colleague in the office of Regency my brother Leo the Curopalates. He has the youth, life, and force that years may have taken from my sire. They two, as joint Regents, will form a government that all men can trust—such as I can trust when I leave for the Far East."

"And cannot you trust your own wife?" she broke out.

Nicephorus uttered not a word, nor did he make a sign.

"It cannot be. Has it come to this? Have I not saved your life from Bringas? Have I not set you on this throne? Have I not imperilled my all, my own life and liberty, my very soul, for an Armenian soldier of fortune—I, the daughter of ancient kings and heroes, the wife, the mother of Emperors of Rome?" She spoke with passion, seeking, if she might, to overwhelm him with her majestic presence.

Nicephorus spoke not a word; slowly he drew from his robe the diploma with its vermilion seal that created Bardas the Cæsar and Leo the Curopalates joint Regents of the Empire during his own absence from Europe.

She strove to snatch it from his hand, with fresh reproaches and remonstrances. "Let me tear it; listen to reason. Will you show such cruelty to your wife? Nicephorus, remember all that you owe me!"

At length, having exhausted appeals, invectives, and threats, she returned to blandishments again, with a mind recurring to the large opportunities for ambition and intrigue which the Palace would offer her in the absence of its Imperial master.

"Cruel man, hard-hearted husband, faithless lover," she broke out with sobs, "you little know or care for all the wretchedness of a wife, deserted for years, it may be, abandoned to the evil arts of her rivals, her enemies—aye, maybe of her suitors and false friends." And she wept, with all the art and pathos of a consummate actress.

"Fear not," said Nicephorus quietly, "you go with head-

quarters into Asia yourself. All fitting preparations for your journey are already being made."

"What!" she screamed. "Am I to be dragged across Asia in the rear of an army, in this terrible campaign into Syria? Am I to be a follower of the camp, a hostage, a prisoner, an exile?"

"You go with all the honours, the state, and fit appliances of an Empress of Rome. Does a Basilissa dread to face a campaign against the enemies of Christ, when the Basileus in person leads his armies to war?"

"Do you take me with you, do you mean?"

"The Basilissa will be at head-quarters, I say, though the Commander-in-Chief may not know from hour to hour whither he may be called in the field."

"And are my poor children, the infant Basileis, to be torn from their mother, to be left here exposed to all the machinations of their rivals—to the humiliations and the plots that your brother may contrive, to all the contaminations of this place—when the love and care of their mother is far away?" And she sobbed and wept tears of mingled wrath and fear, tears not wholly feigned. "They will imprison them, they will mutilate them, they will murder them—my babes, my hope, my pride, my sons of Constantines, Basils, of Leonidas, and of Lycurgus! The Armenian conspirators will slay them, and seize their inheritance."

"Fear nothing, Madam," at last said Nicephorus coldly. "The Basileis go with you, with ample Imperial state and retinues. Your terrors are as needless as they are unjust. Your sons shall have all a mother's care—all a mother's love you can give them. Nor will you suffer any loss of dignity if you cease to be Regent. You are Empress in title and in fact, and will be honoured as reigning Empress, whether in Europe or in Asia; you and your sons will be in the eyes of all men the true Sovereigns of this Empire. It is time that these boys, who are to inherit this throne, should see with their eyes the kingdom they will have to rule, and should hear the shouts of a Roman army as it marches to battle against the Infidel. For me, while this war endures, so long as the Caliph holds the Holy Land, where Christ the Saviour lived, taught, and died for men, it is enough for me to be commander of the armies of Rome, of the soldiers of our crucified Redeemer."

Long did the wily sorceress try all her arts in turn—entreaties, invectives, tears, threats, blandishments, and pathetic

reproaches. Nicephorus remained immovable. Bewildered as he was by the incoherent and contradictory tales he heard as to what had passed in his absence, grieved at the long illness of his friend, overwhelmed with cares of State, and the duties of the campaign, he resolved to postpone further inquiry into the conduct and schemes of his wife. He insisted on carrying her with him, to be near him, and under his watch and guard, but no longer to be at his side, or to be treated with any show of affection. Henceforth she ceased to be his wife, though to the world she remained his Empress. To passionate love and devotion there had succeeded deep distrust and even dread. But even distrust and dread were not strong enough to stifle love. He was no longer her slave : he could not cease to be her lover. He could not cease to be her lover in the silent recesses of his heart, hard as he might strive to tear up by the roots the memory of his fatal passion.

Soon after noon that very day vast crowds collected in the Middle Street, in the Forum of Constantine, and in the Augustaion, and all round the walls of the Sacred Palace. The whole city was wild with excitement, and the streets were decorated with banners and emblems. Hour after hour since dawn the guards had been paraded and mustered on barges. Long caravans of sumpter mules, laden with the tents, furniture, baggage, and robes of the Empress, of her two sons, and of Nicephorus, passed through the Imperial Gate down to the port, where they embarked for the Asiatic shore. But the densest crowd of all was gathered round the harbour of Boucoleon, where the Imperial *cortège* was to take ship. At length, amidst the clang of trumpets and cymbals, the procession was formed. Magistroi, patricians, and prefects, selected by the Emperor to form his Court, amongst whom were our friends, Bardas Schleros, attended by young Eric, Bourtzes, and Balantes, and other generals, chamberlains, and ushers, accompanied Nicephorus to the Imperial galley. It was gently rowed out from the port to a short distance, where all could be easily seen, and spoken words could be heard on shore. The walls, banks, towers, terraces, and every available spot were crowded, whilst the Patriarch, his priests and acolytes, with their crosses and pictures, waited at the point of the quay.

The Emperor ascended the steps to the raised platform on the quarter-deck of the State *dromon*. He was in full panoply, over which fell in long folds the Imperial *scaramangion* of his office,

He turned towards the east, and, reverently raising his right hand aloft, he thrice waved over the city the sign of the Cross. Profound hush fell on the vast multitude. Then he clasped his hands in the attitude of adoration, and, in a ringing voice across the waters, poured forth the prayer prescribed in the *Book of Rites*.

"O Lord, Jesus Christ, my God, into Thy hands I commend this city of Thine. Guard her against all enemies, all disasters, that may seek to come against her; guard her against civil war, and against invaders from the Gentiles. Keep her safe from capture, and safe from pillage: for in Thee we place all our hopes, inasmuch as Thou art the Lord of all mercy, the Father of all pity, the God from whom alone cometh all consolation. Thine is all mercy, all salvation, deliverance out of all temptations and all perils, now and for ever and evermore. Amen."

At these words the choir responded from the shore with long chants of "Amen—Amen—Holy, Holy, Holy, One Triune God." And the vast crowds on the walls and terraces sent up to the sky resounding shouts of "Amen! Amen! Long live our Ever-Victorious Basileus!"

The Imperial fleet set forth at once with sails and oars across the Propontis, and, amidst crowds of boats, caïques, and light galleys, passed over that lovely inland lake between the Princes Islands and the Asian coast, marked with endless headlands, bays, woods, and towers. It sailed on eastwards into the land-locked bay of Nicomedia, and disembarked at Pylæ (the Gates of Asia), a little north of the famous city of Nicæa in Bithynia. This was now practically the head of the great military road which led from the Propontis into Syria, the road which so many armies, proconsuls, and officials of the Roman Empire had traversed for ages—along which the advancing flood of Islam came, step by step, for seven hundred years—the road traversed by the vast and motley host of the first Frank Crusade, one hundred and thirty years later, on their way to Antioch and Jerusalem.

Here the Imperial host was attended and watched by two young and observant spirits, both of whom were deeply stirred by the character and exploits of Nicephorus Phocas, each of whom has left us records of his achievements. One of these was the young student Leo, long afterwards destined to become a Deacon of the Church, and to transmit to us, after a thousand years, the only contemporary history in prose of these events. Though still but an undergraduate at college, his historical zeal had caused him to obtain permission to follow the Imperial train at least as far as Cæsarea; and he was already taking

ample notes of everything he saw, and was diligently inquiring into every detail of the armament and its equipment. His companion was one Joannes, called Kyriotes, and usually known as "the Geometer," from his mathematical learning. He, too, ultimately took priest's orders, and became, late in life, Bishop of Melitene in Cappadocia. We still have verses of his in the form of epitaphs on Nicephorus, his uncle Maleïnos the Hermit, and the Patriarch Polyeuctus. At the date of this journey he was a young courtier—a proto-spathaire, in fact, unattached—and his father, Theodore, a great official, had procured for his son John and his young friend Leo permission to join the Imperial suite and to follow all the movements of the host. It is by the keen eyes and active brains of these two literary enthusiasts that we propose now to follow the Crusade of the Tenth Century.

As soon as the immense convoy of baggage and camp furniture was fully landed on the mainland, the Emperor in person held a review of the train of sumpter beasts, their drivers, and their packs, under the superintendence of the Prefect of the Stables. Leo and Joannes followed in the Emperor's staff, John as the elder, and already an experienced official, pointing out and explaining each section of the equipment.

"The first inspection is to register the proper number of the sumpter beasts sent in to the rendezvous," said John. "The Prefect of the Stables and his lieutenants and subalterns are responsible. Every official, from the captain of a Theme to the lowest grade of the Vestiaries, is charged to produce so many horses, so many mules. The Counts of the Guards, Scholares, Excubitors, Immortals, and the Obsequians are all assessed, and so on throughout."

"Is the number of each requisition fixed by law and always the same?"

"Certainly, it is all noted in the Appendix to our first *Book of Ceremonies*."

"There are no Imperial sumpter animals, then?" asked Leo.

"Certainly there are. The Emperor is now inspecting the contingent. Two hundred horses and two hundred mules from the Imperial stables of Asia and Phrygia. The great stables and paddocks are over there at Malagina, under Mount Olympus. The bishops and archbishops have to send another hundred, and the great monasteries another hundred. Altogether we have here nearly one thousand beasts."

"That is not enough for the army?" asked Leo.

"Oh no! the army is already well on its march, or, in the intermediate camps along the line, ready to fall in. Their baggage animals are by this time well ahead towards Cæsarea. These we see are for the Imperial retinue, staff, and service. The whole have been mustered at the State paddocks, where they have been gelded, branded with the State cypher, and passed by the surgeons. They must be above five and under seven years, shod, bitted, and furnished with saddles or packs, halters, and tethers. Those that are sick or sorry have been rejected, and are left in the paddocks in the veterinary hospital."

"What is the Emperor stopping for now in that group?" asked Leo.

"He notices, perhaps, that the beast is short of proper clothing, or has a sore back, and that his harness has not been properly stamped. No! I see now, he has noticed a mule with a load too heavy. See, he has it taken off and weighed!"

"Why so?" asked the curious Leo.

"No horse or mule can have laid on his back a weight exceeding eighty measures of corn. Yes! They find it is exceeded. The Basileus has called for the driver's check, which is forfeited, and he is ordering the fellow two dozen lashes."

"He is rather more tender to his mules than to his men," said Leo.

"Not he," said John. "Nicephorus is a man of iron to himself first and to others next. To himself, his soldiers, his beasts, he is the same. In discipline he is as sharp and as severe in punishing as any Emir of the Hagarenes or Tsar of the Bulgars."

"Inexorable as Rhadamanthus or Achilles," said Leo, whose mind ran on his Hellenic classics.

"Well! do you not see," said John, "it is not a matter of tenderness at all. Tender is a word not known in the vocabulary of the Sacred Palace, nor of the Roman army. But a mule with a sore back, a cracked heel, or with an excessive load, will soon drop. With it goes its pack, and when this failure spreads the expedition is delayed or weakened. Hence our administration for centuries had prescribed the exact harness, clothes, condition, age, of every baggage beast, and the weight he is to carry, and provides good stables, clothes, drugs, and veterinary surgeons. And Nicephorus Phocas, let me tell you, is the man in all this service the most keen to mark any case

of default, and the most inexorable to have it exposed and punished. I have heard him say that the feet of a soldier are just as essential as his hands, and the legs of his mount may decide a battle quite as much as his lance or bow."

The huge caravan passed on with sure and rapid steps from one camp to another, the troops in each camp joining up on the march, through the plain round Nicæa, to the station at Dorylæum, a district the scene of so many desperate combats—and after a hundred and thirty years the scene of the triumphs of a Godfrey and a Tancred. The Empress and her sons were conveyed with speed and without fatigue in horse litters, and they had their tents, guards, and retinue distinct from that of the Emperor.

It was at Dorylæum, after a severe day's march, that Leo and Joannes were permitted to visit the tents of the Emperor himself. Two were pitched and ready furnished at each station, awaiting his arrival—one for his meals, the other for the night. They were of purple, lined with silk, and supported on stout tent-poles with gilded knobs. Within they were already filled with couches, folding tables, cushions, rugs and furs, with the utensils needed for the table and service, all stamped with the Imperial cypher, baths, books, maps, almanacs, prayer-books, reliquaries, even cases of medicines and surgical instruments. Nor were there wanting immense chests of robes of state, armour, silk and linen garments, even unguents and pastilles, lamps, parchment, writing materials, seals, and stamps. All this vast apparatus was strictly required by the laws and custom of the Sacred Palace. Nicephorus, who despised it, and rejected its use, suffered it to be taken as far as Cæsarea. When the campaign began in earnest, he left it behind him, and fared as simply as any regimental officer in his army.

Just as they had been permitted to view the Imperial tents and fittings, the guard for the night was being posted. The commander of the *Vigiles*, or watch, ordered out a detachment of one hundred guards, who patrolled the external circuit of the Imperial tents. The inner circuit, from the cords of the tent-poles, was guarded by a hundred men from the corps of the *Hetæri*, or Bodyguard. From the moment when the Emperor had withdrawn within, no man could pass the barrier, which was indicated by the shields hung outside the tents.

"From the day that the Basileus enters the enemy's ground," said Joannes, "these guards are doubled, and a more rigid

surveillance is enforced. An Emperor of Rome is not to be caught napping in his tent like a madcap king of the Franks, or a rough-and-ready Tsar of the Ross."

And now the Basileus approached, passing through the lines of men already halted round their quarters. The brigadiers, colonels, and officers dismounted and joined his staff. The infantry fell on their knees and prostrated themselves before their august Autocrator; the cavalry sat motionless on their chargers at the salute. Nicephorus would halt and address each detachment. "Soldiers, I trust all goes well with you! How fare ye, my sons? How fares it with your wives, my daughters-in-law? how fares it with your children?"

And the men answer in the appointed words, "In the light of thy majesty, if all goes well with thee, all goes well with us, thy servants." And the Basileus replied, "Thanks be to God Almighty, who preserves you in health!"

With these words he passed into his tent. The captain of the watch asked him for the password. That night it was "Saint Michael the Archangel."

At night he summoned his principal officers and staff to sup with him. The young Joannes and Leo were even admitted to attend at the repast. Nicephorus was now hastening to take command of a great army, which he knew was worthy of its task—to make head against the swarms of Islam which now reached from the Indus and the Caspian to the Taurus, and from Morocco to the Holy Land. He had thrown off all the cares and vexations of the capital, all the miserable ceremony of the Sacred Palace. He was again a soldier, about to complete the mission of his life. And the young students rejoiced to observe in all his words and his looks, a spirit of hope and confidence that for two years had never lighted up the countenance of the Hermit Sovereign.

As the two students left the tents of the Basileus, they passed over to those of the Basilissa, who had just arrived in her litter from the day's march with a long train of guards, pack-horses, attendants, and baggage servants, and her two sons, with a like retinue. As she was in the act of descending from her litter to pass into her tent, a strange wild figure pressed forward against the guards with loud outcries and appeals to the Empress to suffer him to approach and address her. It was an old man, gaunt and haggard, with long white hair; the upper part of his body was almost bare, and showed emaciated

and worn limbs, whilst he was girt with a coarse and ragged garment from the waist downwards; but his legs and feet, like his arms, were naked, and presented the look of a skeleton exposed to the winds of heaven. His cries and wild appearance, much like that of an Indian fakir, caused Theophano to halt and ask who he was, and what did he seek. He was said to be the famous eremite, Daniel, of Mount Olympus, who had lived in solitary caves or huts for forty-three years, had once had a great reputation for sanctity, but was now believed to have been driven crazy by his austerities. He had lived in a desecrated tomb by the side of the road, and was afflicted with dreadful fits of epilepsy. He claimed to possess the gift of prophecy, vouchsafed to him by the Jewish prophet whose name he bore.

The promise of hearing prophecy caused Theophano to order that the venerable hermit should be permitted to approach her. He advanced towards the royal seat and, standing on a rock, and throwing up to heaven his shrunken arms, he began with loud cries, "Hear the word of the Lord God which He spake by the mouth of Daniel, prophet of the Most High. I have seen in a vision the things that shall come upon this land, for its abominations and all its sorceries. Thus saith the Lord: 'There shall come up against this land a king of kings from the rising sun, with horses and with horsemen, and he shall set engines of war against thy walls, and with his axes he shall break down thy towers. The walls shall shake at the noise of his horsemen when he shall enter into thy gates. With the hoofs of his horses shall he tread down all thy streets. He shall slay thy people with the sword. They shall make a spoil of thy riches, and make a prey of thy merchandise. They shall break down thy walls, and destroy thy pleasant houses. I will make thee a terror, and thou shalt be no more.'"

The prophet foamed at the mouth, and paused from sheer exhaustion. The attendants attempted to seize him. But the Empress motioned them to suffer him to speak. Again he screamed out—

"Thus saith the Lord. I have seen in a vision a great host of men and horses coming from the setting sun, and I hear the crash of battle and of fierce slaughter; and all the ground whereon thou now standest shall be a lake of blood. And the bones of the slain shall cumber this valley, and its end shall be a land of desolation."

Again he shouted, as his long arm pointed at Theophano—

"Thus saith the Lord. Thou art covered with silk and bedecked with ornaments. Bracelets are on thy hands, and chains on thy neck, jewels are on thy forehead, and earrings in thy ears, and a beautiful crown upon thy head. Thou wast exceedingly beautiful, and thou didst prosper into thy kingdom. But thou didst trust in thy own beauty, and playedst the harlot because of thy renown, and pouredst out thy fornications on every one that passed by."

The courtiers groaned out their indignation, but Theophano sat motionless, like a statue of Clytemnestra.

"Wherefore, O harlot, hear the word of the Lord. Because thy filthiness was poured out, and with all the idols of thy abominations—I will judge thee as women that break wedlock and shed blood are judged; and I will give thee blood in fury and jealousy. And they shall strip thee of thy clothes, and shall take thy fair jewels, and leave thee naked and bare. And they shall stone thee with stones, and thrust thee through with their swords.

"Thus saith the Lord. Hast thou killed, and also taken possession? In the place where dogs shall lick the blood of him thou shalt slay, shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine."

These dreadful fragments of biblical imprecation were shrieked forth by the fanatic in piercing tones, whilst his weird, inhuman look and voice thrilled those who heard them, so that they were afraid to move. Theophano listened in seeming patience, with a look of disdainful mockery in her face—somewhat distracted within by her own contempt for the wretched maniac, and lingering desire to hear what she might of inspired or diabolic presage. But, as the violence of passion had disordered the brain and nerves of the ascetic, he foamed at the mouth in a fit, and, with violent shrieks and struggles, he was borne away by the terrified attendants. To the eyes of those around, and even to the searching glances of Leo and Joannes, Theophano herself was the one person present at this scene who had borne it throughout with indifference and contempt.

CHAPTER XXIV

LOVE AND FALSEHOOD

By rapid preconcerted stages, the Imperial head-quarters was moved on from Dorylæum and the valley of the Sangarius into that of the upper Halys, and soon round the salt lake of Tatta to Cæsarea, where a halt was made. It was practically the military route long before traversed by Alexander, and so many chiefs of old and new Rome, and in part by the Crusaders under Walter the Penniless, and Godfrey, more than a century afterwards, when their bones whitened the plain. Cæsarea had been re-fortified and crowded with immense contingents and vast stores as the grand base of the expedition into Syria. There Nicephorus held a series of inspections, musters, and reviews. At many of these, Leo the student was present, under the guidance of his friend Joannes, and he occupied himself with careful notes as to all the nations and tribes which he there saw in arms. The musters of the Charsian, the Armenian, the Cappadocian, and Anatolian themes were there gathered—and with them contingents from the independent Armenians, Georgians, Abasgians, and Iberians. Beside them marched men from Europe, Dalmatian Highlanders, Calabrians, and Beneventan levies, and a strong force sent from the vassal republics of Venice and Amalphi, from the lords of Gaeta and Naples. Here, too, the Emperor rejoined John Tzimisces and his somewhat exhausted force, which had been for a year engaged with the Saracens on the Syrian frontier, meeting alternate success and reverse. That army was, indeed, so much shaken and reduced by its hard service, that Nicephorus was compelled to leave John at Cæsarea to recruit his men and to organise the reserves that were to follow as required. Against this the ardent John protested in his own furious way, but the Basileus forced him to submit.

From Cæsarea the army prepared to enter an enemy's country, and the Imperial paraphernalia, State tents, baggage,

and equipment had been left behind. Nicephorus was now in active campaigning order. All the heights and forts commanding the passes of Mount Taurus had been occupied in strength, and the main army descended into plains through the tremendous defiles of the Cilician Gates. This narrow gorge, cut through the limestone precipices of the range by the head waters of the Cydnus, was just such a defile as are those which we all know to-day in the Alps, having a furious torrent roaring over huge rocks, crowned by jagged pinnacles, and clothed with pines, junipers, and cedars. Through these sombre gorges, amidst the thunder of incessant cataracts and rapids from the melted snows, the whole army poured with ease and safety, for it was summer, and every point commanding the pass was already defended by a fort amply manned and provisioned. The passes once surmounted, the whole army was at last securely concentrated and posted in the broad and teeming valleys of the Cydnus, the Sarus, and the Pyramus. The whole of this rich country fell into the hands of the Romans. Anazarba, Adana, Mopseutia, and twenty strong places, as Leo recounts, were taken by storm. Placing a strong force to invest Tarsus, Nicephorus pressed on to Issus. This captured, the road was open at last to Antioch.

The triumphant march of this army corresponded with its numbers, which Leo seriously placed at the enormous total of four hundred thousand. They ravaged the country far and wide, driving the wretched inhabitants before them into the fortified places, or reducing them by myriads into slavery. Leo, the historian, gives us a terrible picture of the campaign and all its horrors. The followers of the Prophet fought on with courage and obstinacy behind each fortress; they had neither numbers nor equipment able to meet the Romans in the field. Famine, pestilence, and the tremendous engines of the invaders slew the Saracens by thousands. When cities were taken by storm, all soldiers in arms and still resisting were butchered; and the civic population, women and children, were expelled by force sometimes into captivity, sometimes into exile. Nicephorus sternly refused conditional terms of capitulation to a beseiged city proposing surrender. "A venomous serpent," said he, "in the winter season, lies torpid—one would think it dead; the warmth of summer returns, and it is alive and as dangerous as ever. These inveterate enemies of Christ and of His people must be crushed once and for ever!" So the

work of slaughter and extermination went on till the conquering host had reached the confines of Syria and the Amanus.

This career of sanguinary triumph was now suddenly arrested by a cause, the truth of which was never allowed to be known, and for which both in that day and since many different explanations have been given. It was rumoured through the host that the Emperor had countermanded the advance, and gradually the news spread that he himself was retracing his steps. One night, as Nicephorus had presided at the storming of a fortress on the coast, and had with difficulty made an end to the orgy of pillage and slaughter, an urgent petition was brought to him from an officer of rank, who pressed for a private interview on a matter of life and death to the welfare of the Empire. Nicephorus bade them admit him to his tent. It was Joannes, "the Geometer," who had been left with the reserves at Cæsarea, and had now hastened up to head-quarters.

"My gracious Sovereign," said John, "let me speak freely of matters of high treason and your own life. I answer for my truth and loyalty with my head, which I place in your hands."

"Speak," said Nicephorus.

"John Tzimisces, Sire, whom you ordered to remain at the base to recruit his own army, and to reorganise the reserves, has conceived the most passionate wrath against your order and even against yourself," said Joannes.

"He broke out upon me with tears, and almost with curses, when I gave him the order," said Nicephorus; "it is the way of our fiery John. He will cool down in time."

"Sire, he has not cooled down; he has flamed up more fiercely than ever; he has been tampering with the loyalty of the troops."

"Your proofs," said the Emperor sternly.

"Sire, I have brought you copies of two missives that have been secretly passed round the two new battalions of Armenian levies. I was present myself when Tzimisces reviewed them—and I saw him smile with joy and without a word when the ranks saluted the commander to the cry of 'John our Basileus'! I have been through their camps and round their watch-fires, and I have heard them say, 'Our John has been betrayed—Nicephorus is jealous of him—Down with Nicephorus—Long live John.'"

The Basileus listened in silence, read and re-read the circular appeals. "Aye," he said to himself, "it is ever so. The new

levies go after a new man—and they ever follow a man of their own tribe. What is the evidence, my young friend, that John Tzimisces has lent himself to treachery, or has ceased to be my loyal colleague and officer?"

"Only this," said Joannes at last. "Some devoted servants of yours, Sire, watched the quarters of Tzimisces, and one night there was found a man near it whom we knew to be an emissary from your Imperial retinue. We seized, searched, and, as he resisted with weapons, we slew him. In a fold of his belt we found this writing. We do not understand it, nor do we know whence it comes." He handed a slip of parchment to the Emperor.

Nicephorus understood it. He knew whence it came. He knew what it meant. It was in the Armenian tongue. It was in a handwriting that he knew well. It ran thus: "*From the prison of Drizibion, one who has need of thee, and one who can serve thee, calls thee to come at once, for counsel and for protection.*"

Nicephorus was struck dumb with horror and indignation, and hardly maintained his footing or his senses. But he concealed his spasm of shame and wrath from his visitor. "We will reflect on this. Keep absolute silence as to all you know and all that has passed," said he slowly. With assumed calm he dismissed Joannes for the night.

When Nicephorus was alone, he passed some terrible hours of agony and despair, turning over in his mind every catastrophe that threatened the army by a revolt in his rear—and the wickedness of the false wife for whom he had suffered so much—whom even now it racked him to believe so cruel and faithless. After hours of a storm of passion and perplexity, he summoned his confidential secretary, and gave orders for preparations to be made for his own return by forced posts to Cæsarea at daybreak the next day.

What had happened was this. During the halt at Cæsarea the Emperor, being his own Commander-in-Chief and superintending every stage of the expedition, had been incessantly occupied by his duties, and had little communication of any kind with Theophano. More than once he had noticed her presence at the inspections and parades held by Tzimisces, and he had been glad to see her take new interest in the army, and even admit to her Court so gallant a soldier and so true a friend as the "Domestic of the Eastern armies." As these visits became more frequent, Nicephorus resolved to carry on the

Empress and her sons, and not to leave them as intended at Cæsarea. Against this resolution Theophano had vehemently protested in vain. But her indignation was unbounded when, after penetrating a day's march into the northern defiles of the Taurus, she found that she was to be left in the rocky fortress of Drizibion. This was a castle of impregnable strength, perched on a precipitous cliff in the centre of the pass that led to the Cilician Gates. A stormy interview had passed between Basileus and Basilissa.

"What!" she said. "Am I, the Augusta, to be a prisoner in this wild mountain den? Am I to be hidden out of sight, as if it were a convent of nuns? Are my poor children to be shut up in this dreary fort, to pine away in exile, perhaps to be murdered?"

"Madam," said the Basileus gently, and yet with decision, "in such a campaign as that which is before us, with all its perils, fatigues, and hardships, it would be cruel to expose a lady and two children to such a life. When we have conquered a safe and fitting place for you and the little ones, you will follow. I and my army will not be so very far. But your safety and that of the young Basileis is my first care. Here you will be in absolute security, and, indeed, in luxury—in a place which, in this season, has everything pleasant. You will have all the retinue you brought hither, and the whole of your attendants and staff."

"Why was I dragged from Cæsarea?" she asked, with bitterness.

"Cæsarea to-day is a mere camp of exercise. It is no place for the Court of an Empress."

"Am I a prisoner?" she asked again.

"You are the wife of the Roman Emperor," said Nicephorus, with firm voice, "and whilst I live his word shall be law." With this he closed the interview, and went forth with a weight as of a stone upon his heart.

Theophano watched him as he left her with eyes flaming with rage. From that hour she nursed in her heart plans of implacable revenge.

On the morning of the third day after the dreadful revelations given him by Joannes, Nicephorus approached the castle of Drizibion. He had hurried on in front of his escort, almost unattended, travelling night and day, and torn with contending emotions. Passionate love, indignation, jealousy, pity, shame,

and horror, filled his soul by turns. Even now he could hardly resolve upon a course of action. Should he confront Theophano with the evidence of her guilt? Should he discard her and immure her in a remote convent? Should he seize and execute Tzimisces? Would the faction of the Basilissa in the capital raise an insurrection in his absence? Would the army, or half of it, side with the brilliant and popular Tzimisces? Should the chiefs of Rome in this death-grapple be fighting each other? What then would be the issue to the Crusade against the Saracens? What would be the future of the motherless children —of the heirs of Constantine and Romanus—of the Roman Empire itself?

He was still revolving in his mind all these questions when, about noon, he reached the foot of the outer bulwarks of Drizibion. He amazed the guard to whom he disclosed himself, and ordered them to remain silent, as he intended a surprise visit to the Empress. He was told she was now in the garden of the castle with her children. With a sign to the doorkeepers Nicephorus passed in. It was a lovely spot. Perched five hundred feet above the bottom of a mountain valley, along which the military road was cut beside the tumbling waters of the torrent, the garden was shaded with chestnut and limes and beech trees, adorned with flowers and blossoming shrubs. It commanded a varied spectacle of jagged pinnacles of limestone, forests of pines and larches, and in the far distance peaks of snow. 'Twas a glowing day of summer. Nicephorus paused. And now he saw his Theophano in all the blaze of her beauty, in her airy robes of silk gauze, sitting in the shade of a chestnut tree and caressing her younger child. Basil, the elder boy, was in his little uniform of a cataphractic trooper, playing with his toy sword and slaying the heads of the poppies. The mother gazed on the children with delight, fondling the weaker one by her side, and watching the martial spirit of her Basil.

"One day, my darling," she was saying to the elder boy, "they will let us go away from this dull place, and we will all be back again at the Palace at home, where you shall be treated again as the Roman Augustus, and your mother will again receive the homage of a civilised people, and not of these uncouth barbarians, such as you can see on guard below."

"No, mother!" cried the little Basil, "I do not care for civilised people, I want to lead these splendid fellows in battle. I want to use a real sword. I want to be with father in the front!"

The mother smiled, much as she had the soul of an Irene within. It was a scene of pure beauty, peace, and love. It struck Nicephorus to the heart with a new flood of pity, of affection, and pride.

Who was he to consign such loveliness and motherly instinct to a cold convent? Could such grace, such tenderness, be treacherous and false? Could he blast the young lives of these children by destroying their home and driving their mother into exile? Still uncertain what he would do, Nicephorus stepped forward, and stood before her with a look of profound sadness and reproach.

"My Lord, my Sovereign, my deliverer," cried Theophano, rushing forward to her husband, when she saw his look of sad and stern reproof, "you have come to take me away from this prison—this exile, this wilderness, where I and my babes have lived in sorrow, whilst you have been adding fresh glory to your name, and new life to Rome?"

The little Constantine climbed his knee, and the boy Basil pulled his arm to show his father how many stalks of the enemy he could slash off with a single blow.

He stood irresolute and confounded. Theophano fell on his neck, and, weaving her arms round him, she sobbed on his breast, murmuring, "Take us from this prison."

"Whom did you count on to take you from this prison, to whom did you write to deliver you?" said Nicephorus.

"To whom but to you—to my Sovereign—to my husband," she said quickly; "to whom else could I look? You had all the urgent letters, petitions, messages, I dispatched to you in the field?" Nicephorus looked silently and sternly, and said not a word.

"No?" she said, with a gasp, "you did not receive them?" And then she added, "You did not receive even my last short summons in Armenian, in the form in which I used to write when I made you Basileus of Rome?" she said proudly; "you did not even receive that love-letter of mine? I thought it might touch you at last?"

"Do you mean this?" said he, and took from his bosom the Armenian script—"*From the prison of Drizibion, one who has need of thee, and one who can serve thee, calls thee to come at once, for counsel and for protection.*"

"Ah!" she cried in triumph, "then you did have the last, and it brought you! My Lord, my husband, and my consoler!"

And she moved to embrace him again.

"Madam," he said quietly, "this was sent not to Tarsus, where I was in field at the siege, but to Cæsarea, to the camp of reserve."

"Yes! the messenger whom I sent was an attendant of my own, he had orders, if he could not learn where the Emperor was in the field, to go on to Cæsarea to ascertain from the officers in command where the Emperor could be found. By the Holy Spirit, I swear that he had strict orders to hand this writing to no one but the Basileus himself. You see he has done so, and you have come."

"Madam," said Nicephorus at last, slowly and calmly, "I have come, and I have come as the result of this very message. But your messenger did not hand it to me. He died in the execution of his orders. The parchment was handed to me by the man who killed him, and who found it in his belt."

A long and terrible silence ensued. At last Nicephorus spoke. "I have come to take you back to Cæsarea, and to place you there in safety, till this war is settled, and we can return to the capital. We will say no more. There is the miserable thing;" and, tearing it to fragments, he flung them over the precipice into the cataract below.

"Nicephorus," said she, in a voice of intense anxiety and fear, "you will not slay me—nor mutilate my children—nor put us away in exile?"

He turned from her in stern silence, and now almost with loathing and scorn. At last the fire of love that consumed him was almost burnt out to its embers.

Having given orders for the guards, retinue, and attendants of the Empress, and of her sons, to be at once moved down to Cæsarea, Nicephorus hastened thither in person by forced marches, and straightway summoned John Tzimisces to his quarters.

Tzimisces came dashing in with that jovial air of hearty good-fellowship which made him the idol of the army. He was still chafing under the injury the Emperor had done him by ordering him to remain behind in camp, but he recovered his temper on learning that Nicephorus now ordered him to start for Tarsus at the front, whilst the Emperor in person remained at Cæsarea to organise the levies. He admitted that his Armenians had raised disloyal cries at parade, but he satisfied the Emperor that he, John, had been no party to the movement. "Examine my

staff officers," said Tzimisces, "and see if you can find a trace of treason on my part against my Sovereign, my Chief, my friend. It is true that he cruelly wronged me in keeping me here like a raw recruit, whilst he revelled in glory himself. It was a burning shame, and I have told my own comrades all the bitterness I feel. But as to plotting treason to overthrow the Basileus—no! I am not yet come to that! John has a hot temper and a sharp tongue, and will strike when he is struck, but he is not a back-stairs conspirator like those eunuchs and cubiculars of the Palace."

"You have had no cubicular at your own quarters?" asked the Basileus.

"What, I?" replied the fiery John; "he would be kicked forth like a dog if he came to my tent," said John hotly and frankly.

"You had no missives from Drizibion?" asked Nicephorus.

"From Drizibion?" said John. "What is that—the castle that commands the pass north of the Cilician Gates? I know not who commands there, nor what he can want from me. From Drizibion? Who was stationed there?"

"The Basilissa and her sons," said the Emperor, "and all their guards and retinue."

"What!" said Tzimisces, "the Empress at Drizibion? I thought you carried her and all her retinue across into Cilicia, and kept her beside you at head-quarters." And John looked straight into the eyes of Nicephorus with such a genuine face of frankness and truth, that the Basileus now saw that Tzimisces, at any rate, was no party to the plot—if plot there were—was not guilty of dishonouring his Sovereign and his friend.

Nor was John false, nor as yet at all seduced by the arts of Theophano. Nicephorus reflected that, according to the story he had heard, Tzimisces had never received the intercepted missive. There was no undoubted proof that it was addressed to Tzimisces at all. No name was written, and Theophano had sworn that it was addressed to her own husband. Be this as it may, there was no proof that Tzimisces had anything to do with it, nor that he had, either before or since, received anything of the kind. No proof; but doubt, gloom, and despair lay ever deep down in the inmost soul of Nicephorus Phocas. At all times he was rarely seen to smile. He never smiled again in life.

CHAPTER XXV

LOVE AND TROTH

FAR different were the scenes which, during this time, were being enacted in Constantinople itself. Leo, the Curopalates, and his father, the venerable Bardas Cæsar, maintained strict order and good government in the capital, and carried out all the urgent orders of Nicephorus for the safety of Digenes, the Lord Warden, and of Agatha the Princess. The unfortunate Warden, still in the height of his fever, was carefully removed in a litter to the palace of his sister's husband, the Lord Comnenus, of the family which ultimately was raised to the throne. There his sister, the Lady Theodosia Comnena, and the Princess Agatha, with their attendants, nursed him in his illness, and there he was treated by the famous physicians, Theophanes Nonnos and Synesios. The one was the author of an important *Encyclopædia of Medicine*, the other had studied under Arabian physicians, and translated their works into Greek. All that the science of the age, combined with all the love of two noble women, could do to save the life of the patient, was lavished for many an anxious week, whilst the Warden lay in great danger and in continual delirium.

At times he would fancy himself at the siege of Chandax, shouting to his men to plunge the scaling bridge from the great Tower—"Down with her—clear the gangway—another ladder there—water on that burning roof—On, my men, for Rome—Christ!—Mother of God!"—and then he would sink back on his pillow exhausted, groaning—"All is lost—has our God delivered us into the hands of the Prophet?—Thy will be done—hallowed be Thy name."

At other times he would fancy himself in a dungeon, whilst he could hear the battle raging in the walls round him, and he would cry out—"Loose me from these chains, O my God!—I hear the Romans at the charge—am I chained for ever like a dog?—give me my sword—leave me but one hand free—let me

strike one blow for Christ—oh ! this is worse than death—give me one hour of life and air again—then let me die and be heard no more."

The women sat beside him, silent, in tears, watching his ravings with pain and fear, and besought the learned physicians to try some calming drug. With this, on other days, he would be in a gentler mood, though still in delirium. He would stare at Agatha with eyes open, but not recognising who she was, and would murmur, incoherently—"Sweet lady, you have saved me—let me save you too—come with us to Rome—learn to pray to Mary—all good women love Mary—it is so beautiful to see them in the gallery there in Hagia Sophia—Theodosia will be so glad—if you only knew Theodosia—and I think Agatha will be glad too !—Agatha is so kind to girls she loves—My father was of Arab race, you know."

Agatha listened to all this with pity, wonder, and at last with a sense of pain. "Of whom is he talking ?" she whispered. "I have heard of a Saracen girl who saved him in the prison in Crete. Oh ! she is in his mind. He thinks I am she. He loved her, then, and not me ;" and she burst into a flood of tears.

"No, no," Theodosia broke in ; "he has always loved you, dear, but he has often told me how the Emir's daughter, Fatima, saved his life, how he saved her honour, and how he hoped she would consent to become a Christian, and would come to visit me here in our castle in the Princes Islands. My brother has always loved you, Agatha. Even in the Emir's dungeon he prayed to Saint Agatha, and saw her in a vision smiling upon him."

"Was Fatima so very beautiful ?" asked Agatha suddenly.

"Very beautiful," said Theodosia ; "she was thought to be like her brother Hassan, who died in our father's castle in Cappadocia ; and Digenes, you know, was his cousin, and singularly like him in countenance."

"He loved Fatima!" cried Agatha, in agony, "he thinks now that I am Fatima, he is dreaming of her now ; see his lips move with words of tenderness—he will die loving Fatima. I will go into a nunnery and end it all."

"Oh ! speak not thus," cried Theodosia ; "my brother never loved woman save only you. He is very kind and generous, and the soul of honour and chivalry. He did all he could to serve the woman to whom he owed his life. If she loved him,

I know not; I am told she was overjoyed when the General charged Digenes to take her and her sisters and followers to Spain. But this I know, that Digenes never loved woman but his own Agatha."

"Ah, yes! the Lord Warden was chief of the embassy to the Caliph at Cordova, and Fatima was in that mission;" and Agatha covered her face with her hands and softly wept silent and bitter tears, as she watched the utter exhaustion of their patient.

The fever had many intervals of abatement and then of relapse. One night, when he had seemed all day to be stronger, and had taken more food than usual, his delirium broke out in a terrible form.

"Take her away!" he shrieked again and again. "It is a Fury—it is a fiend.—She seizes my hand—it burns me to the bone—never, never will I be false—away, away, her eyes are like red-hot iron—her hair is full of hissing snakes—she is the daughter of Satan—away from her—away from her—she shall not touch you, Agatha, even if she roast me to a cinder! Mother of God, save me from her! Saint Agatha, save me!"

The two women looked at each other, with wonder and horror in their faces. Neither spoke. They knew nothing of what had passed. They imagined things dreadful and unholy.

"He thinks only of you, Agatha, as his protector and saint," said Theodosia at last.

Again and again their patient, who had a violent relapse, broke out with gasps and convulsive agony—"There is blood dripping from her hands—she holds a cup of poison—she calls in the assassins—she is smiling with joy—there they are stabbing him in the back—Help, help, treachery, butchery—it is the blood of the Basileus himself that chokes me!" and he sank back groaning out the words, in gulps of rage—"She-devil, murderess, whore!"

The women cowered in terror and shame, and implored the physicians to try some means of reducing the delirium. Theophanes Nonnos watched these recurrent fits with minute observation, and at last he noticed how the patient, in these wilder moments of violence, kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling of the apartment. He frequently pointed with his hands, as if he saw actual figures aloft, and he continually waved his arms as at some terrible sights above his head. Now, Theophanes Nonnos was a diligent student of Hippocrates and Galen, and

prone to watch the reaction of external surroundings on the nervous system of his patients. He then saw that, on the frieze of the noble apartment to which Digenes had been carried, and facing his bed, was a mosaic decoration which had been copied from the same original as the mosaic wall at Ravenna, which represents a ceremonial procession of Justinian the Great and the Empress Theodora. This picture Nonnos ordered to be covered with a curtain of neutral tone. This done, the spasms of the patient rapidly subsided.

In a few days the physicians were able to assure the watchers that the worst of their anxieties was past, and that a period of quiet convalescence had set in. Hour after hour, so far as his returning strength permitted, Digenes poured out to Agatha his protestations of unbroken devotion ; he told her how in Asia, in Crete, in Spain, and in Thrace, in camp, in battle, in prison, in the Palace, and in church, the image of the saintly Agatha had been his consolation and hope ; he told her how the Basileus had given his formal consent to their marriage, and had given orders for its celebration with the highest honours, so soon as the Warden was restored to health. His health now, he murmured, wanted but one thing to be as good as ever. Would she say what day, next month, he might call her his own? Would she bend down to his pillow, whisper it in his ear, and seal it with a kiss—one kiss—the first she had ever vouchsafed to him ?

Agatha listened with rapture. She did bend down and whispered in his ear, and suffered her lips to rest on his. She did not tell him how often, during his long delirium, her lips had touched his burning forehead and his fevered hands, as she stooped down to bathe them with attar of roses and orange water. But she was very slow, indeed, to believe that her Digenes had never loved the fascinating houri of the old Emir's castle—not for a time—not for a day—not just a little bit in all chivalry and faith. Nor could anything persuade her that the Lady Fatima had not loved her Digenes, loved him passionately, truly, in all honour and in all sincerity. It was quite impossible that a woman of feeling and goodness could owe so much to her Digenes, could be on such terms of sentiment and confidence, and be half converted to his religion, and not love him. Any woman so near must love him, would love him, ought to love him.

At last, one day, Agatha was finally convinced that she had

the whole heart of Digenes, and had never ceased to have it, from the hour when she first met him as a girl in her father's court, and had seen the young hero, whose feats and chivalry the poets commemorated in song. The Lord Warden was now very much restored to health, and wholly to his reason and consciousness. Agatha had read to him some of his favourite pieces, the parting of Hector and Andromache in the sixth Iliad, and the parting scene from the *Alcestis* of Euripides. He had even asked her to recite the famous lines of Sappho, from the poems which were then extant—

φαίνεταί μοι κῆνος ἴσος θέοισιν—
"*—that man seems to me the peer of Gods—*"

—but she archly refused, as he was not strong enough to listen to such fiery poetry, and she was not going to recite such pagan stuff.

To them entered the lady Theodosia Comnena, who gaily saluted her brother with the words, "News, news, something that will interest you both, something I trust that will give you, brother, as much pleasure as it will give to Agatha."

"A conundrum," said they both, "we give it up."

"A rival of yours, Agatha, a flame of yours, brother," said Theodosia, with a peal of laughter.

"That dear girl, Sophia, the daughter of the old Emir Abd-el-Aziz, has just come to see me. Her brother, the captain, young Anemas, who was sent on the embassy to Fez, and afterwards to Cordova, has persuaded the Lady Fatima, your lady-love in Crete, brother, to accept the pressing invitation of Sophia and her father to visit them in Prote. She is to come with her brother and sister, and within six months Fatima shall go with us to hear the Patriarch perform divine service. And before a month more is passed, she shall marry Anemas, before he joins the Basileus in Syria. So think no more, brother, of your tawny angel. She is to stay with the whole blood of the Prophet, Christian though she will be, and Christian as Anemas already is."

"Thanks be to Mary of the Daphne," said Digenes, with hearty rejoicing. "Has she promised Anemas?"

"Not yet, to marry," said Theodosia, "but that is an incident. She has promised to come, brother, and she believes that you are married by this time yourself."

"Who told her that?" said Agatha quickly.

"Well, I strongly suspect that Anemas told her, as an indispensable condition of proposing marriage with himself."

"Ah! then I was right after all," said Agatha, with a deep sigh, and looked earnestly and almost reproachfully at Digenes.

"My beloved," said the young hero, with deep feeling, "your suspicions were true, perhaps, in part. But as to me, I have been ever true throughout."

"Another piece of news," said Theodosia; "if you two can keep a secret, which is not to be blurted out to these Palace gossips. Eric, the young Varangian, will one day marry Sophia when he comes back from the wars, where he is winning glory on the staff of the Basileus in Asia. There may be two weddings on the same day. Nay, brother, perhaps there might be three on the same day, and the Basileus preside in person at the ceremony!"

"Tut!" cried Digenes, with animation, "not for us. I do not wait till Eric and the Basileus return, nor till Anemas can wring a 'yes' from his bride."

"No! nor till Fatima can be persuaded to visit her cousin in Prote," said Agatha archly. She was now at last convinced that Digenes had never failed her, in thought, or in word, no, not for an hour; but she still meant to be married before Fatima could reach Constantinople.

By slow degrees, and in very guarded and modified ways, Digenes allowed Agatha to know as much of what had passed in the Palace as he could remember, and as much as he thought it kind or prudent as yet to tell to the pure and gentle spirit with whom he was to be united. The astrologer's potion had confused his brain to such a degree that he had but a broken memory of the interview with Theophano. His long illness, with its continued delirium, had left him with a mind troubled as with a series of terrible and incomprehensible dreams. He could not shock the girl in her happiness with all his horrible suspicions and recollections. Nor would Agatha, on her side, as yet trouble his mind with all that she suspected and feared.

At last, having exchanged confidences as far as they each thought it kind and wise to speak, it was agreed between them that in the tremendous crisis of the great war, in the weight of cares that beset the Basileus day and night, they would not harass him with the torture of fresh revelations, of which the formal proofs would not be easy to find.

"Agatha," said Digenes solemnly one day, on receipt of

the inexplicable news of the sudden retreat of the Basileus to Cæsarea, in the very midst of the campaign, "the Basileus has called me to the front by special messenger. I start for the camp in an hour."

"Go," she said, with a deep sigh, "if it must be. I will wait till you come again with fresh renown. The cause of this Empire of Rome, of God, of the Mother of God, shall not be hindered one hour by the love of one feeble girl."

"Think me not unkind, my love, my hope, my saint," cried the young hero, with the light of battle for Christ and His people in his eyes; "think me not unkind, if I have to hasten away from the holy shrine in which your love has suffered me to kneel, to worship, and to adore; think me not cold if I hurry off to my Sovereign and my command. I could not love thee so well, if it were not that I loved honour even more."

With one long kiss they parted—nor did they meet again on earth.

CHAPTER XXVI

OLD ROME

THE scene now passes from the Imperial Palace of New Rome on the Bosphorus, to the Catholic Basilica of Old Rome on the Tiber, where the greatest of the Saxon line of Emperors was about to claim the inheritance of the Cæsars, and to instal his house as supreme in all Italian lands. It was Christmas Eve, 967, on a bright morning of winter, when snow lay on Mount Soracte, and on the higher ranges of the Sabine and Alban mountains. The Flaminian Way, from the city gate under the Pincian hill, for the two miles to the Milvian bridge over the Tiber, was thronged with a motley crowd of the populace of Rome, bearing visible signs of its heterogeneous origin and lawless habits. With them came officials, civil and ecclesiastical, in their State robes and with emblems of office, and strong detachments of Northern soldiers, both horse and foot, whom the Roman mob regarded with terror as monsters of ferocity and force. The Prefect and the Senate of Rome—a strange contrast from the senators who had gone to welcome Julius and Octavius some thousand years before—were hurrying along to meet their German Emperor, intermixed with the standard-bearers of the Roman militia, the long processions of priests and choristers, and the counts and barons of the Italian fiefs in military array and fantastic armour. It was a strange jumble of races, types, and various characters. The mongrel and craven descendants of African, Syrian, or Slavonian slaves jostled the degenerate heirs of the ancient patricians, and both looked on with awe and wonder at the huge, fair-haired barbarians who took their orders from no man but their mighty chief, the Saxon Otto.

At the northern end of the Milvian bridge there had been erected a rude and hasty kind of triumphal arch, decorated with the emblems and colours of the Emperor-King. Near it was posted, waiting to see the Imperial procession pass, a small

band of spectators, whose speech and garb proclaimed them to be foreigners at Rome. One was our friend Michael, the protocolist, who, with Joannes Kyriotes, the geometer, had been dispatched by the ever-watchful Chancery of Constantinople on a roving and secret commission to observe the current of Italian politics, and especially to study the real feeling of the Papal Court, and also of the democracy of Rome. With them was Symeon, a learned divine, who was travelling to obtain traditions and legends for his great collection of the lives of Saints and Martyrs. A fourth foreigner was Alexios, an artist in mosaic decoration, who had been called from Byzantium to Rome to superintend the restoration of the dilapidated mosaics in the Church of St. Cosmas and St. Damianos. They were being personally conducted by Guido, a Sicilian long settled in Barium in the Lombard Theme, a loyal subject of the Byzantine Emperor. The whole party had their own armed attendants as well as a small bodyguard from the municipal police, for the state of Rome was far too unsettled to permit of distinguished Greeks being safe in the midst of a turbulent crowd.

"Is it possible," said Michael to Joannes, "that these battered walls of Old Rome can have kept at bay for a single day the mighty King of Germany?"

"Well, they helped Belisarius to beat off the Goths," said Joannes; "but then they had our soldiers under a great chief inside them."

"I dare say they may serve to baffle Goths and Germans," said Michael, "but, though I am no soldier, I can see that these obsolete and now ruinous walls never could be compared for an instant with the mighty fortifications we could show them at home on the Bosphorus."

"The walls of Old Rome are poor enough," Guido now broke in, "but the castle of the Archangel, with the chapel on the top of the old Mausoleum of the Antonines, that is a pretty stronghold, I assure you."

"I admit that is a tremendous fort," said Michael, "and the sight of its tiers of colonnades and battlements makes one understand how Theodora and Marozia, Alberic and Octavian, managed to command the city and even defy both Lombard, Tuscan, and German."

"Ah!" said Guido, "you honourable and reverend sirs in New Rome cannot conceive the pandemonium that has raged

in Old Rome ever since I can remember, and all through my father's time. One Messalina after another, the daughter, the concubine, or the mother of a Pope, has made her lovers or her children despots of the city, Bishops or Popes, as the fancy seized her. Every other year this Roman populace, which is no good at fighting, but has a diabolical genius for riot, breaks out and overturns Consul, Prefect, Pope, and Emperor, as the German King calls himself. Thereupon down comes an army of these hairy barbarians from Lombardy, over the Apennines or the Alps, bursts into these tottering gates—crowns a new Pope, instals a new Count as Governor, massacres, hangs, tortures, and burns every man they find in their path."

"How many Popes have you seen, Master Guido?" asked Symeon.

"John X., strangled in prison. Then Leo VI., and Stephen VII., both creatures of the foul woman who killed John. Then she made her own son Pope by the name of John XI. A few years after this Marozia's son, Alberic, made Leo VII. Pope, and after him, Stephen VIII., and Marinus II., and Agapetus II., in succession. Then John XII., the grandson of Marozia, was the worst of them all—denounced by a Synod as guilty of murder, perjury, incest, sacrilege, and magic. When John XII. was deposed came Leo VIII., then Benedict V., who was also deposed, and now the successor of St. Peter is our Holy Father, the venerable John XIII., whom God, in His infinite goodness, give to live the years of St. Peter."

"Why, that makes as many as thirteen Holy Fathers of Rome within forty years," said Michael, with a sneer.

"Such is Rome," said Guido, "and half of them were the lovers, sons, or nephews of a bloodthirsty harlot, at whose orders they sell bishoprics; blind, mutilate, torture, and crucify their opponents and rivals."

"And they call this the universal Church Catholic, and ask ours, the earliest Church of Christ, to submit to their sacred prerogative," said Michael bitterly.

"Ah!" sighed Symeon, "it is a fearful backsliding. But God in His mercy will bring about their repentance in His good time. We, who compile the hagiographies of Saints and Martyrs, cannot forget that under these Roman basilicas there rest the bones of the blessed St. Peter and St. Paul, that this city has been ruled by Gregorys and Leos, and is sanctified by the blood of so many virgins and martyrs of the faith. The Church of

Christ will be restored one day, and Rome again will be the centre of Christendom in Europe."

"I will not attempt to prophesy against your reverence," said Guido, "I can only speak of what is, and what has been in all living memory. This famous city is now a den of bandits, the haunt of infamous women, and a scene of bloodshed and torment. These barons live in their castles amidst gangs of hired ruffians, till they ride forth to fight each other or to plunder their neighbours. I have seen these grey walls hung with the carcases of their victims, and these streets, churches, and streams run with blood, whenever the horsemen of some pretender to the throne, or of the German princes, come down to sack the city, or to quell an insurrection of the citizens. I have seen Popes made and unmade at the order of a profligate woman or of a murderous despot. I have seen one crowned Pope trample on another crowned Pope, break his crozier, and tear off his robes, in presence of an Emperor and of all his Court. I have seen the Prefect of Rome hung by his hair from the statue of Constantine, and dragged through the streets naked on an ass. I saw twelve 'Captains of the Regions' hung on gallows, whilst other leaders were blinded, some decapitated. Some were torn from their graves and their bodies cast to the dogs. This is the modern rendering of the *Pax Romana*, and all is done under orders of him whom we are waiting here to see, him whom they call their 'pacific Emperor, Semper Augustus,' and with the blessing of the creatures whom he pleases to nominate as the successors of St. Peter."

This conversation of the Byzantines was fortunately not understood by the bystanders, and it was now broken off by the arrival of the German Emperor and his staff. Otto of Saxony, who had been Emperor for six years, and had been occupied ever since with the conspiracies, intrigues, and revolutions of Italian princes, prelates, and people, was now again entering Rome in martial array. He was guarded by powerful bodies of his Northern veterans, the terrible warriors with whom he had established his rule from the Tiber to the Elbe, with whom he had triumphed over Danes, Slavonians, and Burgundians, men who had fought with him on the tremendous field of the Lech, when he saved Europe from the Hungarian flood. These gigantic horsemen proudly bore aloft the ensigns of their great chief, and thrust their way with brutal contempt amongst the "dregs of Romulus" in the road.

In the midst of his chivalrous bodyguard rode the great Otto in full panoply, acknowledging the salutations of the people with magnificent ease, making little difference in his bearing to prelate, baron, or captain of the urban militia. By his side rode his son Otto, then fourteen, destined to lay his bones in early life in the Church of St. Peter. And then came the Empress Adelheida, whose beauty and inheritance had first called the King into Italy. The Imperial *cortège* was surrounded by German and Italian barons, and was welcomed by Roman prelates and nobles with banners and the chanting of hymns, and the boisterous acclamations of a fickle populace, which was ever ready to cheer or to revile, as the popular fancy swayed to and fro.

"Do you see that fierce bull-headed lord on the black charger, and as proud as a peacock?" said Guido to his friends. "That is Count Pandulph of Capua, now Lord of Spoletum and Beneventum. They call him 'Iron-Head': I say, 'Bull-Head.' He is traitor to our Basileus, nay, the head of the traitors, and seeking to win favour from the German Basileus. That gay Roman prince is Crescentius of the Marble Horse, and by his side is the Count Benedict of Praeneste, and the rich and beautiful Stephania, the *Senatrix*, as they are pleased to call her. Now, watch that Bishop on the mule in the train of the King; notice his keen face, his subtle glances all round, his easy smiles of welcome, how he fawns on the Imperial officers, what airs of importance he assumes as he waves his blessing to those who salute him, and thrusts aside those who impede his path.

"That is the Right Reverend Luitprand, the famous Bishop of Cremona—Patriarch of Christendom, as he thinks himself, and Lord High Parakeimomenos of his Frankish Majesty. Note him and listen to him. He talks Greek, Latin, Frank, or Hebrew, I am told—even Arabic at a pinch. He has the Cæsar's ear. We shall hear more of him."

As the Byzantine visitors made their way back to the city, their guide from Barium was occupied in answering their questions and satisfying their curiosity. "It looks as if the whole city had been destroyed by Saracens," said Michael, "I see nothing but ruins standing amidst dunghills and rubbish heaps. And those huge towers of brick with battlements of stone, rising out of mud hovels and fetid alleys—are those the palaces of the Roman princes?"

"They look to me like the dens of robbers, piled up out of marble ruins. See those Corinthian columns and those porphyry slabs, awkwardly stuck into a huge barrack of bricks. These Romans use the ancient temples of the old gods as lime-kilns, and the circus and theatres of the Cæsars as so many quarries to make some gloomy fortress," said Joannes.

"Woe! Woe is Rome!" groaned Symeon. "Thy glory is departed. Desolation has made in thee its home!"

"Not only is the glory of Rome departed, but art, culture, letters, and manners have gone too," said Alexios the artist. "They curse the Vandals, Goths, Huns, and Lombards; but these Romans to-day are just as savage themselves, nay, worse barbarians, for they mangle and disfigure even their own ruins. All sense of beauty and all traditions of art seem to have quitted Italy and taken refuge on the Bosphorus or the shores of the Ægean. They could not decorate the smallest chapel without our help."

Early on the morning of Christmas Day the Byzantine visitors were conducted into the Vatican basilica, to witness the crowning of the young Otto with the Imperial diadem, the ceremony by which the politic Emperor sought to fix the Empire as hereditary in his house, and instal it in effective control of the whole of Italy. They found the German troopers strongly posted within and around the castle of the Archangel, the frowning bastille which overawed Rome, and rudely thrusting back the unprivileged mob of sightseers. From the Ælian bridge over the Tiber they traversed the long colonnade which led to the *atrium* of St. Peter's, with its fountain and the tombs of Popes. There they witnessed the Pope, John XIII., and his cardinals receive the Imperial party on the thirty-five steps of the entrance. With martial surroundings and sacerdotal pomp the mighty Otto, his wife, and son were conducted into the basilica of Constantine, which had then been the venerated temple of Rome for six centuries and a half.

The Vatican basilica of the tenth century was, of course, wholly unlike the St. Peter's we see to-day. It was quite similar to the restored Church of St. Paul's *fuori le Mura*, as we now see it, but it was some twenty feet longer and a little wider, and had five naves divided off by four rows of vast monolith columns. There were ninety-six in all, of various marbles, different in style and even in size, for they had been the first hasty spoils of antique palaces and temples. The walls, above

the order of columns, were decorated with mosaics, such as no Roman hand could then produce or even restore. A grand arch, such as we see at the older basilicas to-day, enriched with silver plates and adorned with mosaic, separated the nave from the chancel, below which was the tribune, an inheritance from the prætor's court of old. It now contained the high altar and the *sedile* of the Vicar of Christ. Before the high altar stood the *Confession*, the vault wherein lay the bones of St. Peter, with a screen of silver such as the Greeks called *iconostasis*, crowded with silver images of saints and virgins. And the whole was illuminated by a gigantic candelabra holding more than a thousand lighted tapers.

The Byzantine visitors were amazed to find the cathedral of Old Rome so utterly different from their own Hagia Sophia at home. It was nearly one hundred feet longer and not much less in width. Its mosaics, its monoliths, and its tribune resembled those of the great temple of Justinian, but its flat roof, long aisles, rude workmanship, and want of symmetry roused contempt and pity from the cultivated taste of the Greek artist. The basilica of St. Peter's was indeed but a crude adaptation of the law-courts of the Cæsars, whilst the Church of the Holy Wisdom was one of the most original creations in the whole record of human art.

Otto, Adelheida, and their son were conducted by a splendid procession of nobles and prelates to their appointed places at the foot of the *Confession*, where they prostrated themselves in worship, and then passed on to their thrones. The Emperor—for in Rome, at any rate, Otto was indeed the sole "Augustus, crowned by God"—was now not only master of Rome, of Northern and Central Italy, but practically Lord of the Pope and Sovereign in all causes, civil or ecclesiastical. Otto bore himself as in very deed the Sovereign Lord of the Holy Roman Empire. He condescended to beam approval on the act of his nominee, the Holy Father, when the Pope raised the crown of gold and placed it on the beautiful head of the Imperial boy, whom he pronounced to be *Imperator Augustus* by the will of God. As these sacramental words rang through the church, all hushed in profound silence, the whole congregation burst forth into acclamations of "Long Life and Victory." Thrice the shout was repeated. And then the choir broke forth with their "Lauds"—reiterated and monotonous chants to Christ, angels, apostles, martyrs, and virgins, to grant the new

Augustus the aid of Heaven to support him against all his foes.

"An impudent travesty of the secular ceremonies at the crowning of our Basileus, I say," Michael the diplomatist broke out, as the great crowd followed the Imperial *cortège* into the *atrium*. "They copy our very phrases and words, as if that could make a barbarian king a Roman Augustus."

"The Saxon savage seems to fancy himself another Carolus, who indeed was a hero and a Cæsar. He, at any rate, felt some awe of the Empire, and sought to be a good friend to our Basileus and his Empire," said Joannes "the Geometer," who knew history as well as science.

"Nay," said Michael, "Charles once talked of marrying his eldest daughter Erythro to our Basileus Constantine; and Irene the Basilissa sent over the Court Eunuch Elisha to instruct the baby Augusta in our language, literature, and deportment."

"Did not the pretender Charles, even after his mock coronation in the Vatican, actually propose to marry the Basilissa Irene himself?" said Joannes.

"Would that they would ask for a tutor, a professor, or a silentiary, eunuch or not, to come over and teach them a little of art, letters, and courtesy," said Alexios.

"Ah!" said Symeon, "if only that blessed alliance between the Basileus of our house and a Basilissa of theirs, between a Saxon king and an Imperial princess, could be brought about, what tidings of great joy would it not bring!—peace on earth and good-will amongst men. The revered Churches of Christ would come together again as one. The Catholic and the Orthodox faith could then unite to make Christ and His Cross prevail over the Hagarene, and convert the pagans of the North and the East!"

The idea of some conciliation—at least some *modus vivendi*—between the rival claimants to the Roman Empire had long floated in the mind of the politic spirits of the age, and it occupied especially the designs of that far-seeing statesman, Otto himself. The coronation of his son and heir brought the problem to an acute stage. The following day the Emperor held a long and secret Council in the Vatican palace in which he was installed. The monarch was now in his fifty-sixth year, his powerful form giving signs of his long career of toil and of battle, his fair hair was grizzled with years, and his majestic

countenance deeply furrowed with thought and care. He sat on a daïs with his loved queen by his side, and the young Otto, now Imperial Crown Prince, between them. The lad was auburn-haired, very fair, bright, delicate, and small even for his years. He looked but a puny successor for the mighty ruler of the West.

Otto had called to his Council his very politic Father the Pope, and his trusty delegate the wily Bishop of Verona. Pandulph, Count of Capua, was there, and beside him the stout old chief, Duke Burckhard of Swabia. One or two Italian counts and prelates held a lower place at the board, and amongst them had been admitted a young Cluniac monk, whose learning, experience, and acuteness had already recommended him to the Pope and to the Emperor. He was Gerbert of Aurillac, who was yet but twenty-seven, but his studies in the schools of Cordova, his lofty character and profound sagacity, had made him already a man of mark. And we know that he was destined, under the name of Silvester II., to prove himself to be one of the greatest of the Popes, and the most politic brain in Europe.

The Emperor opened the Council thus: "Holy Father, right reverend prelates, noble counts, we have called you to this Council to make known our will, and to consult you on the means of compassing it. In the thirty years since we have worn the crown of our father, King Henry, we have welded into a single realm the German and Italian lands, and in these later years we have restored the Empire of our glorious predecessor Charles, and revived the dignity of the Roman name. The Holy Father has now conferred the Imperial title on our son, who in due time will have to maintain our office in this Holy Roman Empire. It is true that your Otto is King of all German lands, of Burgundy, Bohemia, Poland: Suzerain of Denmark, and of Hungary. We are King of Italy, and Roman Imperator Augustus. But our rule does not extend in fact to the south of Italy, over Apulia and Calabria. These fair lands and ancient cities are still held by him who claims the Imperial name, who rejects our right to use it, by that Sovereign of the Greeks who are schismatics from the Holy Catholic Church, who deny to our Holy Father the title of Vicar of Christ on earth, as they deny us the right to call ourselves the representative of God here on earth. And beyond the southern limits of Italy lies that fair and rich island of Sicily, once a bright province

of the Roman Empire, but now enslaved by the Saracens and Moors of Africa, who cruelly ill-use the servants of Christ. It little boots if we rule from the Baltic to the Bay of Naples, from the Rhine and the Rhone to the Danube, if South Italy be not ours, if Sicily follow the False Prophet, and if the Greek who still calls himself Roman Emperor reign within two days' march of Rome. Be it by arms, or be it by policy, we are bent on transmitting to our heir all Italy as his kingdom, and the acknowledged title of sole *Imperator Augustus*. Right reverend and most noble councillors, shall this be done by policy or by arms?"

A long silence ensued, for none knew to which course the Emperor inclined, and they hesitated to thwart his purpose. Otto looked round and scanned the faces of the councillors.

"My Lord of Capua and Beneventum," he said, "you look like a man who knows his own mind, and your fiefs lie next to those of the Greek. What says the Count Pandulph?"

"My liege," blurted forth the impetuous "Iron-Head," "my voice is for war—open, sudden, and to the knife. These Greeks are crafty as foxes, and cowardly as sheep. Hold no parley with them. Give me the order to march and twenty thousand lances, and we will sweep them away to the Bay of Tarentum and the Straits of Messina."

"How say you, my Lord Bishop, you who speak their tongue and have seen so much of their capital and Court?" said Otto to Luitprand.

"My liege, as a civilian and a churchman, I am disposed to prefer the ways of peace and of policy. The brave Count of Capua would prove his valour against every enemy of your Imperial Majesty. But the Lombard and the Calabrian Themes of the Basileus are countries most difficult to invade or to conquer. They abound in mountains, defiles, and torrents; they are defended by strong forts securely placed on rocks or on bays of the sea; what is worse is their fever-breeding plains, which are certain death to the gallant soldiers of the North. That which is even more important is this: the Byzantine fleet dominates the sea; the immense coast-line is at its mercy; they can pour in endless supplies, provisions, arms, and succour. My liege, I advise an embassy to Byzantium. Seek for your son a daughter of their ruling house; and let the dowry of the Greek princess be stipulated to be the lands they unjustly withhold from the King of Italy, the Roman Emperor."

"Can you induce their Basileus to yield so much?" asked Otto, with a smile. "We fear they hold themselves to be at least our equals in place."

"The fierce Armenian soldier, who has married the widow of his Basileus, is proud enough, self-willed enough, and filled with the ambition of a rebel angel. But they tell me he is losing favour both with Church and with people. He is beset on the north and on the east. Nicephorus is at death-grapple with the Caliph in Asia; he is menaced by Bulgarians and by Russians; he has enemies and traitors in his capital and his very Palace. His people long for peace. They are very rich, very politic, and careless of the honour of their name. If well plied with persuasive words they will yield. Demand the hand of Theophano, the daughter of Romanus, with the Italian Themes as her dowry. The Empire will regain two noble provinces; our Imperial prince will gain a lovely bride; and the grandson of your Majesties, a third Otto that is to be, will wear the crown of a sole and undivided empire, without a rival and without an enemy."

"You look gloomy, most noble Duke," said the Emperor, as he turned with a keen eye to Burckhard at his side; "does this splendid prospect of our sagacious Bishop not approve itself to your valour?"

"My liege," said the Duke stoutly, his huge limbs writhing with suppressed excitement, "your Grace is a German King; I am a German Duke. Your realm, north of the Alps, is of vast extent, and in perpetual peril of enemies, traitors, and conspiracies. Half of it has only been won or pacified by your own invincible arm and your unsleeping wisdom. Danes, Poles, Slavs, Hungarians, and Franks are not finally crushed. They may pour in again. Not whilst you live, my honoured chief; but will this fair boy by your side wield the mighty sword of his father? Will an unborn Otto be able to control the brave, free, aspiring races of our Fatherland? Will younger Ottos curb the restless mob of Rome and the craft of these Italian barons? My king, return to your German kingdom, and make that secure for your house and your people. Let not the house of Henry the Saxon be drowned in these Italian lagoons, and the blood of Saxon warriors drench the pestilential plains of Italy. They are brave as men can be, but they are not proof against the fevers, and the wiles—and the harlots of this land of sin, of poison, and of ruin."

"The Holy Father will not admit this Apocalyptic picture of the Eternal City," said Otto, with a lofty smile, "and you forget, most noble Duke, that we are the Roman Emperor, crowned of God by his Holiness here. We together are charged by Christ the Son with the care of the Church Catholic and this Holy Empire, of which Italy is the oldest and fairest part. What says his Holiness?" the Emperor asked, calmly restraining the storm rising between his Teuton and his Latin councillors.

"Our advice will be given in the private ear of your Imperial Majesty, as is most meet for the servant of the servants of Christ. But I will ask you now to listen to my young friend here, this learned brother, who has seen so much of the Courts of Spain, Gaul, and Italy, whose observations may be useful to your Grace."

Otto assented with a gracious smile, and the young monk Gerbert stepped forward at the summons, his keen face lighted up with genius, and the play of Gallic eloquence dancing in his mobile lips.

"If I presume to speak in this august presence, and in so eminent a Council, it is only that I have lived in the lands of the Franks and in that of the Caliph of Spain, and have some knowledge of the powers that lie to the west of the Empire and of this Italian kingdom. The wealth, the power, the science and the arts possessed by the people who obey the Ommeyad Caliph at Cordova are incredible—not easily to be conceived by those who have not witnessed them. The so-called Fatimite Caliph of Africa has power and resources equally great. It is he who holds in his grasp the rich island of Sicily. In Asia the children of the False Prophet have been gaining for generations on the people of Christ. To the north and to the east of the German realm there lie Poles, Hungarians, Russians, and Slavonians, who are hardly within the fold of the Church, who care little for our Sovereign Lord the Emperor, and even less for our Holy Father the Pope of Rome. It will be a tremendous task to make them Catholic and Romans. If all this be so, the union of all Christian princes and of all Christian Churches is the one thing urgent and necessary. Let us pray for the day when all Christian rulers and all Christian men may go forth in a holy war against the unbelievers, to rescue the tomb of Christ and of His blessed Mother, of the Apostles and Saints, and to preserve the people of our Lord from the blasphemies of Mahomet.

It will soon need all the combined strength of Christendom to protect the Church of Christ. That will be a most terrible day when Christian princes and Christian Churches are in death-grip with each other. Would that our Sovereign Lord the Emperor could make some alliance with those who rule in Byzantium! Oh! that Old Rome could be led to stretch forth the hand of brotherly communion to New Rome. Oh! that one day all those who claim the inheritance of Constantine might do homage to an Imperial descendant of our Lord the Emperor."

"May I speak, since this matter of State seems to touch so closely myself?" said the Imperial youth, with his sweet smile and bright look to his father. "I long for such a bride as the Bishop describes the Princess, lovely, graceful, brilliant—with all the charm of that polished Court and all the genius of old Greece. Her mother came, they say, from Lacedæmon, and her race from the hero kings of Sparta, of whom I have read with my tutor in old Plutarch."

"His Imperial Highness speaks the truth with his usual discernment," fawned the courtly Bishop; "they who have not seen Byzantium cannot imagine its splendour and the majesty of its state. An alliance with the daughter of Romanus the Basileus, granddaughter of the seventh Constantine Born-in-the-Purple, as they boast so often, would give fresh glory even to the son of Otto, to the grandson of Henry. The Empire of the mighty Charles has been sundered for a hundred years. If it were merged by marriage in the race of Constantine it would shine forth again like the sun risen after a gloomy night."

"What says our Empress?" asked Otto, "for this touches her deeply, too, and must move a mother's heart."

"My Lord," said Adelheida, still beautiful, thoughtful, and loving, devoted to the hero of her young dreams, "a Greek Princess, graceful, accomplished, and intelligent, would add fresh lustre and culture even to your throne, mighty as it is."

"But will our advances be well received by him who occupies the Golden Palace of Justinian?" said Otto.

"Nicephorus Phocas," said the Bishop positively, "is between the devil and the deep sea, as our Lombard proverb runs; he has no choice. He will grasp your offer. He has restless Bulgarians on his northern border, and fierce Saracens on his eastern frontier. Byzantine churchmen and officials now here in Rome tell me that the people and the Church are weary of

him. The army has a new favourite. The widow whom he married cares for him no more. Nicephorus will yield, if he be pressed by an envoy of superior culture, who knows how to handle an uncouth soldier."

"We will consider of this embassy and project of alliance," said Otto, as he broke up the Council. "Mother and son, churchmen and civilians, are for peace, love, and friendship. My lord of the Iron-Head and of the Iron-Hand, with his gallant men-at-arms, is all for war. It may not be impossible to try them both, and see which of the two our friend the Basileus prefers. My Lords, and reverend sirs, we thank you."

CHAPTER XXVII

OLD ROME AND NEW ROME—RIVALS IN EMPIRE

The mighty Otto, after long consideration of the two plans proposed in Council, committed the fatal error of alternately resorting to both, and, for the first time in his long and splendid career, met with mortifying rebuffs in negotiation as in war. Adopting at first the advice of the politic Bishop, the Emperor advanced to Naples and there received the envoys of Nicephorus in state. The Basileus, who sought only to gain time whilst he poured reinforcements and stores into his stronghold of Barium, lured on the Germans with hopes of obtaining the hand of the Princess, and the Italian Themes as her dower. In the meantime he doubled the defences of Barium, and dispatched his trusty Lord Warden to take command of the provinces in Italy and to defend them to the last drop of his blood.

Otto at last, finding himself baffled with hollow promises, listened to the advice of Count Pandulph of the Iron-Head and of Count Gisulph of Salernum, and, securing his rear at Beneventum, he suddenly, without warning, dashed down upon Barium, with a picked body of his Lombardic and German veterans. In his thirty years of reign, Otto had swept his enemies before him from the Baltic to the Tiber, and he looked for an easy victory in the Lombard Theme. He had made the expedition an Imperial progress, with the Empress and their son in his camp, and the flower of his Saxon, Swabian, and Italian troops. But he was too late. The gallant Warden had provided at every point for a desperate defence. The fortifications of Barium stretched from sea to sea. A powerful fleet secured the coast and poured in provisions and arms. And the population, bound by long tradition and commercial interest in loyalty to the Byzantine Empire, served with zeal in the defence of their city. To the summons of the Saxon to surrender the fort, Basil Digenes returned as proud a defiance. Otto had dashed upon it without the means of a regular siege, at the

instance of Count Pandulph the Iron-Head and his brother Landulph, who intended to make it their own. After weeks of bootless attacks which the Lord Warden repelled at every point, the Emperor retired in disgust and flung himself into the arms of the wily Bishop, whom he sent on a new embassy to Byzantium.

It was a lowering day of June 968 when the learned and eminent Bishop of Cremona found himself at the Golden Gate of the fortifications of Constantinople, as the Ambassador Plenipotentiary of the Augustus, crowned of God, the Emperor Otto. The suite of his Eminence consisted of secretaries, chamberlains, and attendants, and a select band of men-at-arms, gigantic swashbucklers from Pomerania, "bravoes" in reality, who were familiarly known as the "lions." The party were mounted on their own horses, and ceremoniously challenged the guard to open the Golden Gate to the representative of his Imperial Majesty. But no gate was opened. The sky was now overcast, and the rain descended in torrents; but it did not cool the wrath of the pompous Bishop and his people. Hour after hour they waited in the storm, in spite of all their appeals and demands; the Bishop pouring out Ciceronian philippics at the barbarism of his hosts, and his officials importuning the stolid Guard of the gate with remonstrances that were neither understood nor answered.

Late in the afternoon the Silentiary Symmachos arrived, with a military escort; the gates were opened, but, with positive asseverations that no foreign person could be suffered to ride through the streets of the "City guarded by God," the Bishop and his party were forced to dismount, and were taken on foot through gaping crowds and muddy and unsavoury lanes to their lodging in a remote corner of the city near Blachernæ. The residence assigned to the mission was an empty palace of marble, which the irate Bishop discovered to be cheerless, dilapidated, and comfortless, letting in rain and open to the wind. The wrath of the courtly prelate, his disappointment and vexation, could not be publicly expressed. But he vented his spleen in the turgid Ciceronian epithets scattered throughout the flowery dispatch which he now addressed to his "August and invincible Emperors of the Romans, the Ottos, and the most glorious and August Empress, Adelheida,"—a record which, with all its exaggeration, pomposity, and caricature, is one of the most precious documents of the Middle Ages.

Two days of delay passed in which the Bishop fumed and inveighed against "the Greeks" and all their tribe, pouring anathemas on the building, the food, the wine, and the accommodation; on Michael, the Sicilian, who was appointed their caterer and "steward of the palace." His Eminence now found that he was practically a prisoner, and guarded by uncouth Russian sentinels who neither understood his language nor suffered his attendants to pass or communicate outside. At last he received an official summons from Leo, the brother of Nicephorus, and Curopolates, who desired to regulate the ceremonial of the reception by the Basileus. Again the portly prelate had to wade through mud and rain on foot; he arrived breathless and in a bad temper, and bustled into the chamber of the Royal Palace, proud of his mastery of the Greek language, and bearing the missive that contained his credentials from his Sovereign. Luitprand began a speech that he had prepared in Demosthenic style, wherein he called himself the envoy of "the August Basileus of the Romans." But here Leo peremptorily interrupted him, and said, "There is but one August Basileus of the Romans on God's earth, and he resides in this Sacred Palace. Your master, we understand, is King of several tribes of the West, and we could not recognise his envoy under any other style."

"But my Lord, who of old was crowned King both in Germany and in Italy, was lately anointed *Imperator Augustus*, which in your tongue is *Basileus*, by the Holy Father himself, in the Church of the Apostle Peter in Rome, and that with the assent of the prelates, barons, and people of Rome. Augustus, Trajan, and Constantine had no more solemn investiture of that holy and sublime office."

"What! do you venture to call that a legitimate consecration which was attempted by the infamous traitor, John XII.?" asked Leo bluntly. "We heard that your King deposed the apostate priest who officiated at his coronation, and crucified the populace which shouted at his installation."

"My Lord the Emperor has indeed had occasion to purge the prelacy and the mob of the Eternal City, and there can be no better proof of his Imperial authority and his unquestioned title to rule," said the Bishop stoutly.

"The pretension to assume the title of *Emperor of the Romans* was an attack on the prerogative of the Imperial successor of Constantine the Great," said Leo positively. "And you, my

lord, cannot be admitted to an audience if you persist in claiming for your master the title of *Bāsileus*."

"But *Basileus* is Greek for *King*, is it not?" the Bishop rejoined.

"No!" said Leo; "the Greek word for *king* is Ρηξ."

"That is Latin, *Rex*, not Greek," cried out the learned and pertinacious Bishop.

"It seems that you have come here, my Lord Bishop, to quarrel and to insult us, and not to make peace," said Leo, determined to close the interview.

Seeing no chance of pressing his point, the prelate advanced to hand his diploma to the Curopalates in order to be laid before the Emperor himself. But Leo, with an air of sovereign disdain, declined to handle the missive, which he waved to the Grand Interpreter to take into his charge. He abruptly closed the interview, and the Silentiary conducted the disconcerted envoy to his own abode, muttering his indignation, with tags from Cicero, Virgil, and the Bible.

"The tall man thinks himself a Master of the Ceremonies," said the Bishop to his secretaries, "but he is a broken reed like Pharaoh of Egypt, as the Prophet says, whereon if a man lean, it will pierce his hand."

The very next day it was Whitsunday; the Bishop received the summons to attend the audience of the Emperor at seven o'clock in the morning. At six he began his weary tramp on foot from the northern end of the city, and after some delay was ushered into the magnificent Hall of the Nineteen Couches. There Nicephorus, in state robes (which the irritable Bishop declares were old and ill-fitting), sat on the throne of Solomon with the golden lions on the steps, the young Basileis sitting on stools behind his left hand. The ambassador of Otto, remembering the courtly magnificence of Constantine, had expected a royal welcome. His wrath was great when Nicephorus, with a stern look, and not rising from his throne, motioned to the envoy to approach the foot of the daïs and prostrate himself. The Basileus, deeply resenting as an insult the claim of the German King to usurp his title, and boiling with indignation at the outrage of Otto's treacherous attack on his Italian provinces, began in this fierce tone—

"It would have been our right, indeed our pleasure, could we have been able to receive your embassy with the amity and the magnificence this Court shows to all friendly powers. The

disloyal conduct of your master has made that impossible. He has taken up a hostile attitude, and has invaded our city of Rome, which he claims as his own. He has put to death our friend King Berengar, and his son Adelbert, in defiance of law and of right. He has slain many of our Roman subjects by the sword or by the halter; he has put out the eyes of others, and driven some into exile. He has attacked cities of our Empire with fire and sword, and seeks by force to annex them to his kingdom. And now, when he finds himself baffled in his treacherous attempts, he affects to be a peaceful friend, and he sends you—you the counsellor and the contriver of these misdeeds—to come to our Court to act as spy rather than ambassador."

The stout Bishop, full of pride in his Sovereign, the great Otto, and in the Holy Catholic Church, of both of which he was now the mouthpiece, was not the man to be cowed by such a fierce diatribe from the "Basileus of the Greeks"; and he boldly retorted in kind, though much of the Ciceronian rhetoric he pours into his famous dispatch was spoken in Italian, aside to his secretary, or was polished at leisure in his closet at home.

"When my master invaded the city of Rome it was not as a usurper, nor as a tyrant, but to deliver the city from a tyrant, or rather from a gang of tyrants. Rome was in the hands of debauchees, nay, of harlots. Surely your Mightiness slumbered—or rather your predecessors in title. If they were in fact, and not only in name, Roman Emperors, would they have left Rome a prey to abandoned women? This Court has never hesitated to depose, to oppress the Holy Fathers in times gone by, till they have been without means to carry on their office. As to Prince Adelbert, he insulted your predecessors on the throne; he despoiled the Church of the Holy Apostles. My Lord came down across the Alps and drove out the traitors and the criminals, doing justice on rebels, as the Roman Emperors of old ordained. As to Berengar and his son Adelbert, they first made themselves liegemen of my own Lord, and received from him the golden sceptre of the kingdom of Italy. Then they turned traitors and rebelled against him. They were driven out—but they are not dead. Your Majesty is wont to treat rebellion in very much such fashion, I trow."

"The champion of Adelbert tells us a very different tale," interposed Nicephorus.

"Let that be decided by single combat in arms," broke out

the Bishop warmly. "Any one of my men-at-arms shall to-morrow, if you give us the lists, prove him on his body to be a false traitor."

"Enough," said Nicephorus sternly; "assume that Adelbert turned traitor. Now answer me this. Why did your master break into our land with fire and sword? We were on friendly terms, and were contemplating a perpetual alliance and union by marriage."

"We hold, Sire," said Luitprand proudly, "that the lands claimed as Byzantine Themes are part of the Italian kingdom—Italian by race, custom, and tongue. They were held of old by Lombard chiefs, and Lewis, the Frank sovereign, recovered them from the Saracens. It was only by arrangement they passed to the rulers of this realm. But now my Lord and master has sent me to effect a settlement of all these disputed questions by an alliance of the Princess Theophano with his own son Otto, on the terms as to her dowry which I am commissioned to propose.

"We have heard enough of this, and must adjourn the audience," said the Emperor abruptly. "It is past eight o'clock, and the procession of this Holy Festival of Pentecost is about to be formed." And Nicephorus rose and had himself arrayed in solemn state.

The Bishop was duly escorted into the tribune of the choir singers, and relieved his spleen by writing for his Imperial Sovereigns a grotesque account of the ceremony. On his return he found things rather less acrimonious at Court.

Nicephorus had now been advised by Leo, Basil the Chancellor, and other councillors that it would be unwise to reject altogether the overtures of the mighty Emperor in the West; and Basil, and the party of the Empress, ardently desired the proposed alliance. This Nicephorus and his brother could not brook to accept, but they were persuaded to play with the ambassador of the Ottos, at least whilst the great campaign in the East was hardly at an end. Accordingly, Leo was instructed to invite the Bishop to the Imperial banquet, and there Nicephorus treated him, not so much with haughty contempt, as with the rough humour of the camp. The Bishop, to his disgust, found himself placed low at the royal table, and surfeited with the unknown dishes, the oil, the caviare, and sauces of the banquet. His spleen broke forth in Ciceronian epithets about the food and the resinous wine, nor was he conciliated by

the rough banter of the Emperor himself. The Bishop was heckled as to the extent of the German armies and territories, and he at once opened a high-flown harangue on the dominions of his master and the prowess of his soldiers.

"Nonsense!" cried Nicephorus, with a loud laugh, for he was resolved to flout and mock the Latin phrase-monger; "they tell me the cavalry are but poor horsemen, and the footmen are so overweighted with corselets, helmets, long swords, and big shields that they have no mobility in action. And they eat and drink too much, making a god of their bellies, though perhaps their drink gives them pot courage, and they can do nothing when rations are short." And Nicephorus, proud of his Cossack troopers and his lithe mounted bowmen, laughed aloud as he had done round many a camp fire.

"Then mark this, my Lord Bishop," Nicephorus went on, returning to his angry tone. "Your master has no fleet. Sea-power is ours. We make war by sea as well as by land. We have two arms with which to strike. You have but one. If we go to war with your master, we shall destroy his sea-board cities, and reduce to ashes all that we can reach by any water-way. Did we not drive him back from Barium? He came there in force—with his wife and his son—with his Saxons, Swabians, Bavarians, and Italians. All of them together failed to capture one petty town. Do you think they could withstand us, whose armies are as numberless as the stars in heaven or the waves of the sea?"

The indignant Bishop tried to speak, but Nicephorus waved him to his seat. "You are not Romans at all, you are Lombards," he shouted.

But this was more than the Italian could endure. Nicephorus raised his hand to bid him be silent, but he broke forth: "Romulus, who killed his brother, and who was born in adultery, gave his name to the Romans. Then he opened an asylum to which homicides, debtors, slaves, and felons resorted, and so he named the mongrel crew his Romans. That was the origin of those whom you call the 'Masters of the World!' We, Lombards, Saxons, Swabians, Franks, Lorrainers, Bavarians, and Burgundians, call a man a 'Roman' when we want to give him an opprobrious name. We mean by Roman whatever is most mean, cowardly, greedy, effeminate, mendacious, and vicious. As to whether we know how to fight on foot or on horse, the next war will prove."

This insolent philippic of the wrathful Bishop was blurted out in incoherent passion amidst the derisive murmurs of the courtiers. Nicephorus did not listen to his sallies, and abruptly rose from the table, ordering the officials to carry the ambassador back to his lodging. For days the miserable prelate lay there practically in prison, neglected, and ill, he declares, from the poisonous wine and the pickled sturgeon he had received. His piteous appeal to the Curopalates only gained him an interview with the Prime Minister, Basil, the Secretary of State, and the Prefect, who told him that the only terms on which the Sacred Palace could consent to giving a Basilian Princess Born-in-the-Purple to a Teuton prince would be the cession of Ravenna, Rome, and the Italian duchies to their lawful Sovereign. King Otto might have peace if he resigned Rome and all Imperial pretensions.

The diplomacy of Byzantium—the great original of which that of the Sublime Porte and of Holy Russia have been but feeble imitations—was employed to play with the wordy prelate, whilst detaining him practically as a hostage or a prisoner. He received a series of affronts and rebuffs. He was left whole days without supplies; he was made to give precedence to "barbarian envoys from Bulgaria, unkempt creatures in uncouth dress," he said. Once he was so rude that he was sent to dine at the inn, where Nicephorus in mockery sent him from his own table "a dish of kid stewed in pickled fish sauce, garlic, and spices." After months of endless negotiations, Luitprand had a final audience with Nicephorus, to whom he was forced to prostrate himself beneath the Imperial feet. "Take back our last word to your King," said the Basileus; "let him cease to usurp our style and infest our provinces, and then come back to us and bring us a favourable answer."

When the great Saxon Emperor learned how his embassy had been treated, and received the vermilion and golden-sealed epistle of Nicephorus composed in the same disdainful tone, he again invaded Apulia and assaulted its towns and castles. The Byzantines had been preparing for the encounter all through the time of the Bishop's visit. Basil Digenes was in command of the forces, and he flew from one stronghold to another, providing its defences and animating the troops. Otto made no real way beyond laying waste the Greek Themes and plundering the unwalled towns. At last the fevers of plains and the vigorous defence of the castles wore out the strength of his

German veterans. The Emperor withdrew to the North, leaving the Count Pandulph of the Iron-Head to carry on the campaign at the head of his Lombard and Italian force. The Count gained some successes and laid siege to Bovinum in the Samnite mountains. Basil Digenes threw himself into the fort and commanded a sortie upon the Count's own camp. There the Iron-Head met the Lord Warden in single combat, and a tremendous duel ensued. The Count was dismounted, and the scimitar of Basil clove his helmet at the very instant that the huge mace of Pandulph crashed into the brain of the Warden. The gigantic Lord of Capua was taken prisoner, desperately wounded, then bound in chains and shipped off to Byzantium, in the same vessel that carried back the lifeless body of his antagonist. Nicephorus mourned his friend, comrade, and right arm—for whom, he was wont to say, ten victories over the Teuton usurper and his allies would be but a poor compensation. In the legends, romances, and ballads of Byzantine glory, the memory of Basil Digenes long remained as the type of chivalry and knighthood. And the Princess Agatha hid her sorrow for her betrothed in a convent. And so, after all her adventures, her hopes, and her struggles, she did at last become the bride of Christ.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BASILEUS IN COUNCIL

NICEPHORUS was seated in his Privy Cabinet of the Palace at Constantinople with his judges and officers of the law, for he felt the internal state of the Empire to be as vital as was the defeat of its enemies on the frontier. He was in council with Simon, Patrician and Chief Secretary of State, Eustathius Romanus, another Patrician, Chief Justice, and two Professors from the Faculty of Law.

"My learned Lords," said the Basileus, "I hope that we may now finally pass the new law that we have in draft on 'Gifts to monasteries, hospitals, and infirmaries in the Roman Empire.' We have called you to advise if the *Novel*, as we propose to issue it, will fully carry out our Imperial design. We find the whole realm to be undermined by the inordinate extent to which monastic institutions have swollen. Multitudes who ought to serve God and this kingdom in arms and in useful service drone away their lives in monkish indolence. The very existence of this Christian land is in peril, surrounded as it is by enemies of Christ, Hagarenes, heathens, heretics, and barbarians, whilst day by day our people crowd into the sloth of convents, hermitages, and hospitals for old and infirm. And the wealth that should go into the exchequer of our State is locked up in these unprofitable houses of refuge for the cowards and the idlers of our people. My Lords, I am resolved to mend it—or to end it."

"Sire," said Lord Simon, the Secretary of State, "the *Novel* that we now submit to your Imperial wisdom, to be added to the Code of your predecessors on the throne, has been carefully drafted so as to prohibit the foundation of any new monastic or charitable corporation, whilst fully guaranteeing the maintenance of all foundations already existing. We conceive it to be no part of the purpose of your Majesty to

suppress the pious foundations of the past, or to confiscate the estates which have been dedicated in law to any religious uses."

"God forbid that I should lay sacrilegious hands on that which is dedicated to God and to the Saints. Would that I could recall some of the follies and the errors of past years. But we will curb this disease in the future. Monkery is becoming the dry-rot of our Rome. Stout fellows who should bear arms in the ranks flock into these refuges for the ne'er-do-wells. And half the land of our Empire is withdrawn from its due cultivation and its due quota of taxation."

"It will be no part of your Imperial will to restrict the alienation in mortmain of estates for the support of old-established religious houses?" said Simon the Protosecretis.

"This must be strictly limited to the restoration of houses which have fallen into decay," replied the Basileus.

"And will this apply to pious gifts to the use of Bishoprics and Metropolitan sees?" asked the Chief Justice.

"Assuredly," replied Nicephorus, with decision; "there are already too many. They are too rich, too luxurious, and too useless. Our realm gets no good from them. There shall be no more founded whilst I bear rule in Rome."

"And as to the cells and hermitages of solitary recluses, your Majesty will not interfere with them?" asked Simon, with some anxiety.

"Not with true and genuine cells," said Nicephorus, somewhat doubting, "not if the man honestly seeks to live a godly life in prayer—alone—and for ever. The prayers of such avail us much. The blessed Elijah went into the wilderness, and when he lay down to die under a juniper tree he was visited by an angel, and was fed by ravens. And so John, the Forerunner of Christ, went into the wilderness, and his meat was locusts and wild honey. And Christ Himself withdrew into the desert, fasting forty days and forty nights. Such a life is holy, and may purge the dross out of our people. Would that I, too, myself had been suffered to end my days in such wise. No! my Lords, we approve of a true and sincere hermitage, of these cells and lauras, as they name them, so that they be solitary, and in desert places, in rocks and mountains, far from men. So that no cell be set up anew on habitable and cultivated ground —this we sanction and approve with our Imperial blessing."

And now Basil, the Prime Minister, craved an audience, and was admitted to the Council.

"Sire," he began, "we shall have very serious opposition to meet from the churchmen, especially from the regular Orders, in all forms. There is already within the Palace a body of monks and prelates, led by the great Abbot of the Stoudion, who have got tidings of the new Imperial *Novel*, and loudly demand to be heard. We shall have trouble, indeed, if we have this tribe against us."

"Bring them in," said Nicephorus proudly, "we will meet them face to face. The Basileus will not be driven from his purpose by a whole army of these men of God."

Presently the deputation of the monasteries was ushered in, and Anthony, the Syncellus of St. George of the Stoudion, spoke in their name in no measured terms.

He said that the whole world of those holy men who wear the mitre and the cowl were alarmed at rumours of the new legislation proposed. They could not believe that their most pious and devout Basileus designed to discourage the religious life of the capital and the realm. Nor could he be purposed to annul the gifts of good men and good women, who sought to save their souls by devoting their substance to God.

"Most venerable Abbot, and you right reverend prelates and fathers in the Lord," said Nicephorus, with a quiet smile, "it will not be believed by any man of sense that we, the Basileus Augustus, by the grace of God, intend aught of wrong against Holy Church and its consecrated ministers. It is known to all men how, after the recovery of Crete from the children of Hagar, we ourselves dedicated a large share of the gold spoil to pious uses. Have we not vastly added to the venerable monastery of Mount Athos, and made it the central sanctuary of our realm? Have we not adorned its church with trophies of bronze and of marble? Have we not presented it with those priceless and adorable relics—a fragment of the Cross of Calvary and the head of St. Basil, of miraculous power?"

"It is known to all men, Sire," said the Abbot pertinaciously, "and it will be counted to your Majesty at the judgment-seat of God. But the report runs that, forsaking such excellent examples in the past, your Council have prepared an edict whereby those pious men and women who have been blessed by the Almighty with the wealth of this world are to be restrained from dedicating it to His service for the salvation of their souls, even in the hour of their death."

"Let them dedicate themselves to His service in life," said

Nicephorus passionately, "and not withdraw their estates from the service of the State, when they can enjoy them no more. We intend not to hurt or to restrain any existing house of religion or of charity. On the contrary, we provide for the restoration and repair of those which are decayed. But we will suffer none to be founded anew. There are enough of them as it stands; monasteries, hospitals, chapelries, and bishoprics. They are rich enough and free enough in all conscience."

"Sire, there can never be enough of man's substance reserved to God and His blessed ones above," broke in the Abbot solemnly, and even rudely; "there can never be enough of holy men and holy women whose lives are passed in prayer and praise."

"Prayer and praise, I warrant," the Basileus broke out, as if he were in his camp; "prayer for alms, and praise of good eating, perhaps! The streets of our capital swarm with these befrocked and shaven idlers. Every village is beset with them. Every hillside is honey-combed with their chantries and their retreats. We want men, not drones. We want men who can fight as well as pray, or one day these temples of our God may be turned into the mosques of the False Prophet."

"We come to implore your Grace to put no bonds upon those who offer their gifts to God," said the Abbot stoutly.

"These monasteries and infirmaries, these hermitages and convents are surfeited with wealth," the Basileus retorted, with passion. "Has not the Word of God warned us that a rich man shall hardly enter into the Kingdom of Heaven? Know ye not that Scripture—'Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, nor yet for your body what ye shall put on. Behold the fowls of the air. Consider the lilies of the field!' And when Christ sent forth His blessed Apostles, did He not charge them 'to take no thought for the morrow, and to provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in their purses, neither two coats, nor shoes, nor staves'? And now the successors of the Apostles fare sumptuously every day, and are clothed in purple and fine linen!"

And now Nicephorus, giving rein to his indignation and wrath, poured out a vehement homily, as if he were himself an ascetic preacher in church. "It is sheer lunacy, this lust of good things—this insatiable craving is madness—as the Psalmist saith, 'they are altogether lighter than vanity!' They add field to field, grand mansions, stables full of horses, cattle, camels,

mules, and beasts without number. These monks, these hermits and servants of the Most High, give all their care to these worldly things in defiance of the plain Word of God. The blessed Apostle laboured with his hands, and those with him ; and doth he not say, ' We wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you ' ? Was not this also the way of life of the blessed Fathers of the Church, and of those who first taught the Gospel in Palestine and in Egypt, and in many places of the earth? They were shining and burning lights to witness to the faith, living lives so free from earth's dross that they seemed to be of the substance of angels more than of men. Hath not our blessed Lord said, ' Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it ' ? And on all sides to-day we see crowds of these men of God who enter in at the broad gate that leadeth to destruction. But ye of the monasteries which cover our realm—' ye lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth. Where your treasure is, there is your heart also ! ' "

The crowd of portly prelates, obsequious monks, and mendicant hermits retired abashed and cringing before this tempest of Imperial disdain. But the stern Abbot of the Stoudion made a haughty obeisance and retired with a bitter scowl. He knew himself to have authority with the people, now at least equal to that of the Basileus. And he was in close alliance with the faction of the Basilissa, and in secret conspiracy with Theophano herself.

The politic Prime Minister had listened to the outburst of Nicephorus with no small anxiety and surprise. He took occasion to warn his master of the power of the monastic Orders and their ill-will towards any repressive legislation. And he had fully tracked their machinations with the superstitious populace and their concert with the Empress and her friends at the Court and in the capital. He implored the Sovereign to moderate the new edict. He pressed him to remember how the people and the Church had defied and overborne the greatest of the Iconoclast emperors in times gone by.

" Aye, well I know that they will bear me ill-will, and bitterly resent my act. Do I seek to please men or to please God? as the blessed Saint Paul saith, I am the servant of Christ. And of this I am sure, that whatever may be said by these pampered men of the cloister, the wise and righteous will

acknowledge that our purpose is most salutary to all true servants of the Lord as well as to the well-being of this our realm. No more of this. My Lord Simon, you are charged to publish this edict forthwith to bear title as the 'First Novel of our Reign.'"

Thereupon Nicephorus turned to consider the drafts of other new edicts, referring to the tenure of fiefs by soldiers and by feudal chiefs. His whole mind was bent on founding a great and standing military order, who should hold lands in perpetuity under condition of service in arms. Basil, as Chancellor of Requests and Petitions, was charged with this *Novel*, whereby it was forbidden to a rich proprietor to purchase a military fief, and by a third it was decreed that a military fief, abandoned for three years by its tenant, should revert to the general body of military tenures, and not fall into private hands. By a fourth *Novel* it was ordered that the estates of great proprietors should not be broken up, but remain in perpetuity estates of magnates. And, similarly, small farms could be acquired only by yeomen. The whole legislative scheme was a rude and ineffectual effort to erect a system of graduated feudal tenures, and to found a permanent order of settled warriors holding lands of the Empire on the tenure of defending it in arms.

And now Nicephorus turned to a scheme which he had even more at heart, but where no Imperial edict without the sanction of the Church could avail. The dearest wish of his heart had long been to obtain from the Patriarch the right to promise the honour of martyrdom for Christian soldiers who might fall in the holy war with the Infidel. Polyeuctus was now the enemy rather than the friend or the counsellor of Nicephorus, and the Emperor had solicited the help of Athanasius of Mount Athos to achieve his end. The Council and the legists were dismissed, and the monk was admitted in private audience.

"Venerable father in God," said the Basileus, humbly saluting his spiritual director as if he were nothing but a penitent in confession, "you who have known Nicephorus all these years as a simple soldier of Christ, you who have so often seen his whole heart and soul laid bare to your sight as to that of God Himself—you know how real is my reverence for Holy Church and its true sons, how deep is my resolve to defend the Faith to the end. It is menaced with ruin, and, in spite of all our efforts to save it, the Cross will one day fall before the False

Prophet, if we cannot find some new spirit to fire the hearts of our Roman soldiers in the fight. They are brave enough, stouter men than these Hagarenes, and their hearts are in the cause. But there is one thing they lack—one thing that these sons of Ishmael have—one thing which makes them men impossible to beat. These Infidels glory in their death. To them to die in battle is to triumph and to be blessed for evermore. The false promises of the False Prophet so delude them that they rejoice with their last gasp that they are passing into Paradise, and with their dying eyes they see the houris of their foul dreams waiting to escort them to the presence of God. I tell you, my father, I have seen these unbelievers on a hundred battle-fields die smiling with joy, as men smile who have won the prize in the chariot race, or as martyrs smile when they see Christ in the sky above the scaffold, saying to them, 'Come, ye blessed of the Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' Our men will face death, but they do not glory in death, seek for death, long for death as a priceless glory, and certain heaven. If Holy Church awarded them the palm of martyrdom, they would be consumed with such fire that they would sweep the Hagarenes back into their desert. Verily they are martyrs. They witness to the eternal Word of Christ."

"Sire," replied the monk, his worn and cadaverous form in strange contrast with the massive frame of the Basileus, "I have held long interviews with the venerable Patriarch, and I find him inexorable and in bitter opposition to your schemes of reform, and especially to this."

"Go back to his Holiness and press him to consider the imminent peril of our Empire and our Faith."

"He will never yield. He has made it a matter of faith, of respect for the sacred ordinances of our Church. The canons of Saint Basil exclude from the sacraments during three years those who have shed blood."

"What! those who die fighting for Christ in defence of His people and of His consecrated altars and fanes!"

"It is the law of the Church, which neither sovereign nor prelate can rescind. And the law of God's Church in Council pronounced is the law of God," said the monk sadly, but with invincible tenacity.

"But this is to sacrifice the people of God to the decrees of men. Truly, as the Apostle saith, 'the letter killeth, but the

Spirit maketh alive.' The Patriarch has entered into the conspiracy against me. And I know that it is fomented even within this very Palace. My enemies and traitors are here. But I will not suffer them to make it the secret haunt of their designs. The prime mover of these deeds is about to be removed."

"My son, what dost thou mean? Hast thou committed thyself to any attempt against the life or the liberty of the Basilissa? Beware, O King, it is a terrible path thou art about to tread!"

"My father, at midnight this day Theophano will be taken in her chamber and silently removed to the royal villa at *Proté*. No harm or indignity will befall her. She will be attended as a Basilissa in retreat with ample retinue—but a sure guard. She will no longer countermine my Government nor plot against my honour and my life. She or I must succumb in this long strife. I am necessary yet awhile to Rome and this cause, or I would rejoice to be her victim. Her victim I may yet be. I will not be her plaything, or her tool—no! nor shall she be my dishonour!"

"Nicephorus, my son in God," said the monk sternly, "thou art treading the path that leadeth to destruction. It was foul sin when thou didst defy the ordinances of Holy Church to wed the relict of our late Basileus. Thy abominable sin hath found thee out, and now thou art rushing into fresh sin in seeking to put her away. What cause hath she given thee, what that thou didst not know—or shouldest have known—when thou hadst her to wife?"

"Father, I say to thee, even as David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' But the woman has been seeking to seduce my best comrades and officers, and tempting them to betray me and to dishonour me."

"Has all this been proved before competent judges? Would his Holiness the Patriarch hold any communion with her if he was certain of her guilt? What proof have you of her offences, and, especially, of the sin of infidelity to her husband?"

"I can obtain no such proof as would convince the Patriarch, who still holds her undefiled, and even seeks her aid in resisting my ordinances as to the Church and my soldiers."

"Whom has she seduced?" said the monk imperatively.

"She seized and then tempted my best beloved friend and comrade whom I now mourn as my brother, and then she

sought to cast her spell on my chief general, with whom I suspect she is plotting against my throne—aye, and I suspect against my life."

"Is this more than suspicion and the fear which ever haunts this Palace? Is not this more truly, my son of sorrow, a sinful love turning into suspicious hate? What proof hast thou of open crime?"

"Speak not of hate, my father, for all her offences and treacheries have not yet utterly burnt out my love. For the sake of Rome and of this cause, and the people of Christ, I must live and rule, and to live and to rule I must put her away. But it is agony even now, my father, to part from her. I would die rather than do harm to a single hair of her head. But she must depart from out this house, from out this city, lest she ruin more men whom this Empire needs in the present sore straits."

"She must not depart from this place, nor be cast out from your throne. Part from the bed that it was sin and folly to have entered, but touch not her Imperial rights. Rome has ever suffered when the house of its rulers has been rent in twain. Remember the dark history of this Palace, and its dynasties, and all the deeds of shame and horror which were done of old when husband drove out wife, and wife conspired against husband, when mother deposed her son, and son rose against father, and brother murdered brother. Remember what was done by an Irene, an Eudocia, a Theodora, a Michael, a Justin, and a Theophilus. Begin not a new tragedy in this house, of which the very walls bear witness to deeds of cruelty, passion, and sin. To throw into prison the widow of Romanus would divide this realm into factions, and would renew the household feuds and horrors which have ceased now for fifty years. And these children, the young Basileis, who must in a few years reign here, how shall they be reared whilst their mother is a prisoner? how will they bear with him who cast her into prison?"

"I am the victim of a cruel alternative, my father, but I am ready to die for this cause. If she has her way, she will ruin it, and, most assuredly, she will work that ruin by my death."

"Then die, if it be the will of God, but sin not—or sin no more. Add not cruelty, revenge, and oppression to lust and folly. Leave to this woman her undoubted rights as Empress, as mother of our emperors, as your own wife. Live your own

life apart from her as you choose. But if you make her your prisoner, the object of your enmity and anger, the whole force of Mother Church shall be directed to restrain your violence, and to defend your victim."

"And the Church condemns me to death, and makes me the victim," said Nicephorus sadly, and with resignation.

"If you do not yield to its summons," replied the monk, with imperious tone, "the Church will expel you from its offices, refuse you its absolution, and abandon you to the spirits of evil to die unforgiven in your sins. Choose, Nicephorus, between your passion and the safety of your soul."

With this terrible word, which was cruel enough to break every spirit of that age, the inexorable confessor left the presence.

And hour after hour the Basileus, with groans and prayers, looked down into the black gulf on the edge of which he felt that he stood.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RISING STORM

Nicephorus, in proud trust in his own mission from on high, and conscious of his own rectitude and devotion to the cause of God's realm on earth, would brook no interference with his will from his ministers, his people, or the priest. He yielded only to the venerated Abbot of Mount Athos, his own beloved friend and confessor, Athanasius, in the matter of the Empress Theophano. He abstained from carrying out his purpose to remove her from the city and place her in honourable restraint. And his submission to the saintly hermit was not a little aided by some lingering, if unconscious, touches of tenderness for the woman whom he once had loved so passionately, and so humbly, so blindly, so devoutly had adored. He was again striving every nerve to reorganise a vast expedition for a third Asian campaign, wherein he was finally to crush the dynasty of Chamdas and secure the Syrian gates of Lebanon so as to open the way of triumph to the Holy Land itself.

The enormous cost of these levies of men, drawn from all parts of the Empire, from the coast of Italy, across Greece and Asia, as far as the sources of the Euphrates, of the countless stores, arms, and equipments they required, strained to the utmost the finances of the State. Nicephorus knew nothing of fiscal resources and of ways and means. He despised all uses of money, unless it were treated as the sinews of war. He left to his ministers the duty of devising the methods of taxation. All that he insisted on was the perpetual replenishment of his war chests—*rem quocunque modo, rem.* He ordered the Exchequer to exact the taxes to the most rigid point. He allowed bishoprics, abbeys, and eleemosynary foundations to remain vacant, whilst the revenues were collected by the State. He withheld the customary doles to the senators and high officers of the Empire, in the name of public economy and the needs of the war against the Infidel. Leo his brother, and Sisinnios the Prefect, were

loudly accused of regrating corn during time of scarcity. And, worse than all, they obtained from the ignorance of the Emperor a decree to coin a new *nomisma*, or gold bezant, which was said to be alloyed as to one-fourth with baser metal, and was henceforth known as a *tetarteron*, a "quarterpiece."

The popular discontent grew day by day, fanned by disappointed nobles, voluble demagogues, and fanatical monks. All day long angry crowds gathered in the streets, markets, and courts of the churches. They were roughly handled by the city police, or savagely dispersed by the foreign guardsmen. The great Armenian soldier himself, his whole soul aflame with the thought of the holy war, despised equally the effeminate nobility, the noisy mob, and the lazy monks. But his martial eye perceived the defenceless condition of the Sacred Palace, and he saw the necessity of securing the seat of government. Accordingly, he undertook a vast defensive work—a wall with towers, battlements, and gates which cut off the city from the Palace. It was something like the later rampart we see to-day that stretches from the Golden Horn to the Sea of Marmora, and separates the old Seraglio and its dependencies from the rest of Stamboul. And, not content with this vast domestic defence, Nicephorus proceeded to enlarge and fortify the palace of Boucoleon, on the edge of the port, which henceforth became the Imperial abode and "keep," as the Normans would have named it. It was the real "Bastille."

Crowds would gather round the works, as thousands of labourers, imported mainly from the Thessalonican Theme and the Greek islands, toiled over the long lines of masonry. Here a voluble street orator, one Simeon, a cobbler by trade, got a number of loafers to listen to his eloquence. "What is to become of us, my friends, if everything in Rome is to be sacrificed to paying soldiers and building fortresses? We used to believe this city with its walls was safe enough against all enemies, East or West, barbarians or infidels, whether they came in ships or over the mountains of Thrace. Are we the barbarians or the infidels against whom the Basileis must be protected by walls and towers? I can remember, my lads, the days of Constantine the good, dear old man, who hated war, and gave us lovely shows, and then young Romanus, with his free hand and kind smile, whom somebody made an end of, they do tell me. Will fighting in Syria bring us bread, or make trade brisk? In old days, the Court took care to sell us poor folks corn at a cheap

rate in bad times. But now it doubles the price, whilst the poll-tax keeps it company at the same rate. And nobody gets work but these blacklegs of Hellenes, or the leather-sellers on the Strymon, where they make the troopers' boots." But here a detachment of Macedonian spearmen, marching to relieve the guard, broke in upon the crowd, roughly forcing their way with the flat of their swords and many a broken head, as they dashed the citizens aside with their round bucklers. Amid shrieks, yells, and curses, the terrified mob took to their heels.

The next day it was Easter Eve, and the city was filled with crowds which poured in from all the country round to attend the celebrations of Holy Week, and the myriad churches, chapels, and chantries rang night and day with *Kyrie Eleison*, litanies, and wild sermons, interspersed with hardly veiled attacks on the Imperial Government and even person. In the great courtyard of the Stoudion monastery, an eloquent brother Elias was holding forth to an excited crowd.

"You have heard, my brethren, how they are about to confiscate the lands and properties dedicated of old by the pious to the Prince of Peace and to the uses of his poorest servants in order to devote them to the war. They pretend that it is a Holy War, a Crusade against the Hagarene, to rescue our brethren from the False Prophet. Was the war against our Christian neighbours, the Bulgars, a Holy War? Was the war with the Catholic Princes of Italy and the German Cæsar a Crusade for the Faith? Are there not False Prophets—aye, and cruel tyrants—amongst the rulers of a Christian State? It is a strange way to drive out the unbelievers to make a dead set at our Mother Church and seize its poor alms whereby it supports the servants of Christ, and keeps alive the starving and needy children of God. We have to feed them, we have to live ourselves, we humble brothers of the destitute and sick. Do my brethren here in these cold cells, do I, look like men pampered with good things and clothed in rich garments? No! my brothers, we are the Lazarus of whom our Blessed Lord spake; and the Rich Man of His proverb lords it behind those Golden Gates. Verily, I tell them that we, the poor and the humble, will be in the bosom of Father Abraham above, and thence we shall see those who have robbed us cast into hell, being in torment amid flames, crying to the Lord to allay their pains."

The crowd broke up with great excitement and gathered in knots at the street corners and markets. At one group a

farmer, who had come in from a neighbouring village, was pouring out his griefs to sympathising citizens. "A company of savage fellows from Mount Rhodope, professing to be new levies for the Macedonian shieldmen, had plundered his homestead, killed his goats, carried off his best horse, robbed his chest, and outraged his daughters." Had he brought his plaint to the city magistrates? "He had, and the sergeant of the company got five big ruffians to swear it was false." "The civil courts can do nothing in the way of justice on a soldier!" another cried. "In my case," said another in the crowd, "I had my plaint laid before a member of the Emperor's own staff. All that I got for reply was that the holy war had in fact begun, and the Autocrator could listen to nothing but to military crimes." "Oh! as to that," whined a shrunken and tattered fellow in the crowd, "I know that he can be pitiless enough. I was charged with being asleep on sentry-go, and got my nose slit, as you see, my masters, and four dozen rods broken on my bare back. I was a ruined man from that day, and have had to beg in the streets ever since. Even the monks will not take me with these scars, for I served in the Bulgar war, and am cut off from the sacraments of the Church. Masters, I tell you, the Basileus is drunk with war, mad with war. To smash the Prophet, he is ready to sacrifice the people of Christ wholesale."

All this time frequent conferences were being held within the Palace itself, in the apartments of the Basilissa, with her connivance, and even in her presence from time to time, which constituted a sort of Palace opposition to the Imperial policy and decrees. The Patriarch would often attend. Two Magistroi, and three other Patricians, and the Abbot of the Stoudion joined the conclave. Day after day, the Patriarch would denounce the informal, schismatic, and uncanonical Synod, wherein the Basileus had obtained the right to choose for bishoprics and abbeys those who were presented to his choice by the Church. It was the eternal quarrel of the "investitures," between Church and Sovereign, which so often and so long shook the West. "This man of war, this unlearned and unregenerate soldier," Polyeuctus would argue, "can thus put into the sees throughout the Empire creatures of his own; and if we refuse to present churchmen whom he favours, he can keep the holy office vacant, whilst his fisc absorbs the revenues to lavish them on the troops."

The fanatical Abbot of the Stoudion now broke in. "He has even dared to tamper with the dues that are levied by our holy Abbey according to ancient constitutions of the pious Sovereigns who succeeded the sacrilegious race of Iconoclasts. His officers even ventured to impound the tribute of oil that belongs of right to the monks of Mount Athos."

"Father Athanasius," interposed Theophano, "will bring him to reason there. He is the one man in Church or in State to whom my lord and master will listen."

"There is still one woman to whom he gives way," fawned the Patrician Theodore.

"No longer," she replied hotly; and added, with an air of resignation, "He has designs upon my liberty—perhaps upon my life."

"Defend yourself, Madam," said Theodore; "your life, your full freedom of action, is now the most precious thing left in Rome. Appeal to the army, to its gallant leaders, to the Senate, and the nobles of our land."

"Our prerogatives are being torn from us day by day," groaned the Magistros Marianos, "the donations which our bounteous Sovereigns from old time distributed to the nobles at the Holy Festivals have been withheld by absurd pretexts of economy. Not that we need or value such trifles of the royal favour. But the public withholding of them has been a slur on our honour, and has fatally diminished our influence with the Government and our authority with the people."

"A chief must be found who is able to resist this oppression," said the Patriarch.

"Say, rather," said the Abbot, "one who is able to replace the oppressor."

Marianos and the Patricians smiled with a complacent and important air.

"Remember," said Theophano, with decision, "nothing can be done but by a soldier. No man can stem the oppression that desolates this Empire if he has not the voice of the army. None could wean them from devotion to Nicephorus but a hero, a beloved chief, one who has led them to victory in a hundred fights."

"Her Majesty speaks truly and wisely," said the crafty Abbot, as the conference closed. Nor did Magistroi or Patricians venture to say her nay.

On Ascension Day, from early dawn, the streets were crowded

with citizens and countryfolk hurrying to witness the processions to the fanes and take part in the ceremonies of the festival. At the Neorion port on the Golden Horn near the *Strategion*, where a body of new recruits had been exercising, a riot broke out between them and the sailors of the merchant ships. These wild fellows from the Armenian highlands looked upon the capital as a conquered city, and had begun to plunder the wine, fruit, and meats that were in course of unloading on the quay. The dealers, their men, and the seamen defended their property. Arms were drawn, and a furious mob assailed the troopers with every missile within reach. For an hour the whole quarter rang with cries of battle and the din of the riot. The soldiers at last, outnumbered and surrounded, fought their way back to their quarters, leaving many dead and dying on the ground. Nor was order restored until the Prefect arrived with a strong guard, and vainly tried to pacify the crowds of citizens who called for punishment of the aggressors, carrying in procession the corpses of their comrades, and intending to bear them to the very gate of the Palace.

Week by week the irritation of the city had been increasing, which Nicephorus, if he noticed it at all, treated with quiet disdain. On that very Day of Ascension he made the official visit of ceremony to the venerated church of Mary outside the northern rampart, known then, and now, as *Pegé*, or the Holy Well. Leo, our young student, and his friend, Joannes "the Geometer," had been called out to the riot and now attended the train of the Basileus. It was towards sunset when the imperial *cortège* returned over the crowded route of many miles, and at last passed into the narrow streets, at that moment thronged with citizens making holiday.

"Do you see how those market fellows under the portico of Theodosius there scowl at the Basileus?" said Leo to his friend. "He would not be safe amongst them without the guard."

"Hear that yell of rage from the roof of the baker's house on the left," said Joannes.

"Nicephorus seems the only man in the street who does not notice it. He rides on with his eyes bent down like a man in a reverie," said Leo.

"After the bloody street fight we saw this morning, it would be strange if the mob were not in a savage mood," said Joannes "Ah! there is a dense crowd in the Forum of Constantine

beyond. There seems to be some one on the steps of the column haranguing the people."

"I see," said Leo, "it is that mad monk from the Stoudion, brother Elias. He has been preaching against the Basileus again. We shall have a pretty row in five minutes as sure as my name is Leo."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when yells, mingled with curses and missiles, filled the air. The guard in front of the procession roughly forced a path through the crowd, thrusting back the people with blows and the hoofs of their horses. The immense mob, furious with indignation, pressed on the riders with outcries and menaces. "Assassin, tyrant, usurper," were the names shouted forth. Stones, garbage, and mud were flung at the Imperial party as the guard closed in a ring round the Basileus.

"By Saint Andrew, this is too much," cried Leo; "the pitcher only just missed his head," as, from the third storey of a tenement house, a virago, with horrid curses, hurled a heavy stoneware jug at the Sovereign below. And from the same window, at that moment, a girl, in a loose dress and dishevelled hair, hurled a brass pan down on the Emperor as he rode beneath their house.

"Break into that door," shouted the captain of police to his men; "seize the old hag and her girl. I know them well. It is a doss-house for the worst kind of begging monk. And the women are as bad as the monks."

"See how Nicephorus there sits his horse and does not even look round him!" said Leo. "He rides on as calm and unconcerned in the hurly-burly as if he were Saint George in an *ikon*. What coolness and nerve the man has! He seems to see their missiles as little as he hears their curses. He looks as steady and undisturbed as if he were the bronze statue of Justinian on his horse."

"And that stone jug might easily have smashed him," said Joannes. "It just grazed the plume; they might have killed him as they did Apambas in the revolution."

The guard closed in round their Emperor, who rode on quietly, without a word and without moving a muscle, amidst execrations and volleys of mud. And night at last dispersed the mob.

The next day the Prefect of the city waited on the Basileus to take his orders as to the punishments to be awarded to

the riotous quarter, and the fate of the prisoners arrested by the police.

"Let them go," said Nicephorus, "and leave the citizens alone. No bones are broken, and I care nothing for their shouts. The times are hard. We may have been too close-fisted with the corn, and my Armenians are a rough lot. But, at such a crisis in the Holy War, I dare not be too hard on my brothers in arms who are giving their lives for Christ. If we can smash the False Prophet for ever, the city mobs will begin to cheer me again as of old."

The Prefect was forced to abstain from any harsh treatment of the quarter. But he kept some of the worst of his prisoners in gaol. And as for the two women, whose missiles had wounded some of the police, and whom he knew to keep a thieves' den, Leo saw them publicly burnt in the Circus of St. Mamas—a low, suburban arena—as a warning to all rioters.

Before leaving the capital for the front, Nicephorus was urged to give a show of chariot races in the Hippodrome with more than usual magnificence. His Council regarded it as a mode of pacifying the public discontent. Seated high in the *cathisma*, the royal gallery, surrounded by the Empress, her sons, and the Court, in full gala trim, Nicephorus submitted with the best grace he could command to the tedious exhibitions of the arena. Before the games were over, he thought it well to give the Byzantine public a sight of the new levies from Macedonia, whom he was about to lead into Syria. So he ordered two "bands," or regiments, of foot soldiers to advance into the arena, just cleared of the horse races, and to be paraded in sections. For a time the citizens on their benches watched with amusement the unwonted spectacle of military evolutions in their Hippodrome. Warming with the sight of his men in splendid battle array, Nicephorus now sent orders to charge in a mimic fight, with levelled lances, and the familiar war-cries of their tribes. As the companies charged till the lances actually crashed upon the bucklers, and the vast Hippodrome rang with the shouts and clash of arms, panic seized the spectators. The cry was raised that the Basileus had ordered a general massacre, as in the dreadful sedition of the "*Nika*" of old. With shrill yells, the crowds rose from their benches, poured down the gangways in mad confusion, and choked the doorways and passages. Shrieks rose far and near, as the terrified crowd trampled each other to death, or were crushed

by the weight of those behind them in the agonies of fright. Before anything could be done to stem the torrent, before the Emperor, in his lofty gallery, quite understood what was happening under his eyes, a ghastly mass of mangled bodies and bloody limbs, jammed inextricably together, filled the corridors and gateways of the Circus, which an hour before had been a festive scene of beauty and enjoyment.

The Basileus arose from his throne as soon as he comprehended the cause of the disaster, and, in a voice which overpowered the shrieks below, gave the word to the troops to halt and stand at attention. Every sword and every lance was held motionless, as the men stood like statues in their ranks. The Emperor resumed his seat in order to recall the people from their panic and imitate his own repose.

It was too late. All the afternoon the ambulances and the surgeons with their staff toiled at removing from the quivering mass the dying and the dead. Nicephorus, having given all necessary orders, slowly and sadly went back to his cabinet, feeling that some curse had fallen on his head, if it were not that God had purposed to end his reign in ruin and blood.

And for long years the people of Byzantium bitterly mourned over the death and mutilation of those dear to them, which they placed to the indifference of their Sovereign, but which really was due to their own folly, cowardice, and panic terror.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LAST CAMPAIGN

Nicephorus was now again in Asia, on his third and last great expedition to achieve the re-conquest of Syria. Night after night the fire signals across the Bosphorus recorded the rapid stages of the Imperial advance over the passes of the Amanus, and day by day couriers arrived with dispatches to the Regents and the Council of State. It was known that the Basileus was bent on recovering to Christendom Antioch and Aleppo, finally driving the Moslem from Syria, and at last planting the Cross again on the tomb of the Saviour in the Holy City.

The capital was kept in a constant state of excitement and expectation. Crowds gathered in the streets and forums discussing the reports and the rumours; and decorations were hung on the buildings and public monuments, as each new success of the triumphant army was announced. The anxiety of the official world was at last satisfied by a meeting of the Senate at which the Regents undertook to make full announcement of the state of affairs.

The nobles and all who had the right to attend, or who could obtain access to the tribunes and approaches, crowded into the Senate House, which resounded with loud acclamations as Leo the Curopalates and his ministers took their seats. And the cheers and cries of "Long, long life" were redoubled when the venerable Bardas Phocas, the father of the Basileus, was borne along into the assembly in his carrying-chair. The old hero, shrunk to a skeleton, wrinkled and shrivelled like a mummy—the sarcastic Bishop Luitprand declares that he looked one hundred—with still some light in his eye, and his snow-white beard, seemed like a ghost of the past, as he was lifted tottering and bent into his place. And the cries of "Long, long life," again renewed, seemed a cruel mockery of his exhausted frame.

When the storm of cheering had at last subsided, the Regent rose and spoke thus—

"Most noble magistroi, patricians, and illustrious senators, we have received a series of dispatches from the August Autocrator to the following effect. With a force of 157,000 men of all arms, 55,000 of whom were mounted, he passed from Cilicia, as already reported, across the mountains into Syria, making straight for Aleppo. His sudden rush upon the country of the Hamdanites demoralised the enemy, who fled in every direction, and left their cities and forts an easy prey to our men. The terror of their approach called out such outbursts of fanatical hate against our holy faith, that it spread as far as Jerusalem, where—it grieves us to report—the Patriarch John was savagely massacred with all his priests and many of his flock, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with the other churches of Jerusalem was burned to ashes."

At these words groans of grief and cries of rage broke forth in the chamber from side to side; and the tribunes and corridors burst into yells of horror and passion. As soon as the tumult could be appeased, Leo again resumed his speech.

"But the Basileus has amply avenged the blood of the martyrs and the outrage on our faith. He has gained a great battle under the walls of Aleppo. Thence he ascended the valley of the Orontes, and stormed Maaret en Noamen, that rich city named after one of the companions of the False Prophet. Thence he swept down upon Maaret Mouserim, on Kafartab, and Chaizar and the city of Hamah. All these rich and splendid cities of Chamdas have been sacked and burnt, and the mosques of the False Prophet destroyed. The land has been laid waste, and tens of thousands of captives have been carried off, with enormous masses of booty in coin, gems, valuables, beasts, and stores."

Loud cheers rang through the hall with cries of "Long life to our Autocrator, Nicephorus the Ever-Victorious!" Leo at last resumed his address.

"But we have a still more glorious triumph to announce. The ancient city of Emesa, which the Hagarenes call Homs, has been captured and destroyed. The Basileus and his staff worshipped Christ in the hallowed and famous Church of St. John the Baptist, and there they recovered that most venerable relic—the head of the divine Forerunner and Herald of the Saviour. This inestimable prize is now on its way to our city, and will be

offered to the adoration of the faithful in the Temple of the Holy Wisdom."

At these words there broke forth a storm of shouts of triumph and joy. The sitting was suspended till the excitement could be calmed, whilst the Patriarch offered up an invocation of thanksgiving to God for the mercy that He had extended to His people.

Day after day fresh successes were made known by the Regents. The Basileus and his victorious troops had now crossed the Lebanon mountains, and were descending the coast of Phœnicia. They were again on the shores of the sea, and in touch with the fleet, at hand to supply all they needed. Swift *dromons* now brought round the Asian coast the reports of the Chief. Gabala fell to the conquerors, then Cæsarea; and next Tripolis was invested. After that Laodicea was made a subject city of the Empire, and the Saracen Emir was transformed into an Imperial commander. With Tortosa and Marakieh the whole Phœnician coast from Tripolis to Antioch was in the power of the Basileus. By the end of the autumn the official report informed the people of the Empire "that eighteen cities, each having large mosques of the Prophet, had been taken by storm or surrendered; together with at least one hundred forts and lesser places which the Basileus has ordered to be levelled to the ground. Vast numbers of the enemy have been removed and taken as prisoners. In other cases, along both Syria and the coast, the inhabitants have renounced the Prophet, and have accepted baptism and our holy faith. The victorious Basileus has now closely invested Antioch, the 'City of God,' as it was once called, and is about to complete the annihilation of the race of Chamdas, and the recovery of the Holy Land, and the Sepulchre of Christ."

This last and memorable campaign of Nicephorus did finally effect nearly all that its author had designed. The power of Islam in Syria and the valleys of the Orontes was broken for two generations. The progress of the Saracen towards the west was stayed, and the safety of the Empire guaranteed until the fatal arrival of the Turk. The Frank Crusades had been anticipated by more than one hundred years. Antioch, "the third city of the world," as Nicephorus himself called it, was ultimately stormed and captured by his arms. And Aleppo was taken by his nephew, and became a tributary State. But Nicephorus himself was not present at either capture. In the

midst of this series of overwhelming triumphs, the most brilliant and effective of his whole career, he suddenly again returned to Byzantium for reasons which his people could not fathom, and which his historians have never explained. The cause was one that touched his honour and his life.

He was completing the investment of Antioch, and building, to blockade it, the vast rock fort of Bagras, carrying the stones in order to lay the foundations on his own shoulder to encourage his men in the work, when he received from his brother Leo a most momentous dispatch. "Great and dangerous intrigues had been discovered in the Palace itself. The Empress has been in constant communication with John Tzimisces, who, in spite of the Imperial order to remain in the Cappadocian Theme, had secretly visited Nicomedia, if not Byzantium itself. John was furiously inveighing against the Basileus for having kept him in the background, as he declared, in inglorious and shameful retirement. In spite of the triumphs of the Imperial arms, the monks of the Stoudion were inciting the rabble of the city and the mendicant hermits and hedge-priests to rebellion and riot. Theophano was the soul of this conspiracy; and, although they had failed as yet to trace any criminal intercourse between her and John, there were ominous signs that she was plotting a revolution, which would place Tzimisces on the throne."

This terrible missive aroused all the indignation and the suspicion in the soul of Nicephorus, which he had struggled to smother and dismiss. He felt the need of instant action to save his Government, his honour, and his life. With bitter feelings he postponed all his projects to recover Antioch, Aleppo, and even Jerusalem and the Sepulchre of Christ. He placed the army of Antioch under the command of General Michael Bourtzes, a Patrician; and he dispatched another army to Aleppo under command of his own nephew, Petros Phocas, son of Leo. Having made all his dispositions for completing the campaign, Nicephorus took ship, and rapidly returned to the capital by sea.

The return of the Basileus was so sudden and unexpected that no signs of welcome had been prepared to greet him. It was the sour evening of a dull day when he made his way back to the Palace, with a very small and quiet retinue, almost unnoticed. Even as he passed hurriedly through the streets, he had noticed monks and demagogues haranguing small knots of citizens on their distresses and the cruelty of the Government.

Leo came down to the port to meet his brother. "The city," he said, "is seething with suppressed resentment and discontent. In spite of all his efforts and the rigours of the police, disaffection was being nursed in the monasteries and churches, and their privileges made it too dangerous to prosecute and punish the disturbers of the peace. Daily the chapels and courts of the clergy resounded with incendiary sermons. The official signs of public rejoicing had hardly concealed the apathy of the public over the successes of the army in the East. Every triumph was regarded as the occasion of a new tax. And the bad season and the tempests with which they had been afflicted made the collection of the revenue a constant source of trouble and disorder."

Nicephorus listened to his brother's report in silence: patient, unmoved, and resolute. He pondered it without a word, with no sign of anger or of fear. At last he said slowly, forcing his lips to utter the words to which he dreaded the answer, "Brother, tell me of *her*."

Leo grasped his brother's hand, and he bent over it, as he replied in a whisper—"Sire, I obey, though I shrink from the task. She is conspiring against you. We seized a secret messenger of hers to John. We found on him a document urging Tzimisces to come to the Palace to confer with herself and her Privy Council. Our officers wrung from the messenger at last that he was charged with verbal assurances of a new marriage and promises of a lavish kind."

Nicephorus writhed silently, but said no word for a space. Then he asked—"What then of Tzimisces himself?"

"We have not been able to obtain any evidence that John has listened to these overtures; nor can it be proved that they have yet reached him. But Tzimisces is a traitor, your enemy, your supplanter. Seize him, blind or execute him. Seize and deport her. They will be your ruin, if not your death."

Nicephorus took no such action. He who had swept Islam before him from the Phœnician coast to the Euphrates—he who was the idol of the most powerful army of that age—he who had found the civil and military organisation of all Asia work in his hand like a perfect machine—cared little for the discontent of the luxurious nobles of the capital, and still less for the idle mobs of the Forum. And, conscious of his burning zeal in the cause of Christendom, and his vast services to the people of God, he cared little for the intrigues and anger of the church-

men. Patriarch and Abbot might be unjust; but Christ and His Mother would intercede for him at the mercy-seat of the Almighty.

Even now he could not bring himself to believe in the treason of John, and he shrank from condemning him without convincing proof. He even suffered Theophano to justify herself, and to refute all the accusations of her enemies. She burst into the privy chamber of her husband, as he strode up and down in thought, swayed with contending emotions and racked with doubts. She dragged in her little Basil, and made him prostrate himself before the Basileus, and kiss his father's hand, and rising in an attitude of superb majesty, with a voice that the greatest actress would envy, she broke forth—

"You will not believe, my Lord, my lover, my glory, that I who raised you to this throne, and saved your life when the masters of this Palace were thirsting for your blood—that I could be seeking to injure you at the highest hour of your triumph. Who could protect my boys, and secure them the throne of their ancestors, if you were cast out, before they were old enough to act for themselves? Their inheritance, their liberty, nay, their lives are in jeopardy, if you their father were gone. What would become of me if they put you away? Could you bear, my Nicephorus, to see me in prison, in a cell, in the veil and garb of a nun? Could you bear to think of me growing old in misery and want? Have you ceased to love me, to feel for me? Do you hate me?"

Nicephorus looked steadily at Theophano with profound sorrow and reproach, gazing at her as if he was searching the depths of her soul. But he spoke not a word. The woman shrank down before him, and clasped his hand.

"I swear before the Mother of God that what they say of me is false. I have never sinned against you. Your brother Leo is a bitter enemy of me and of Tzimisces. He envies his glory, he seeks to poison your heart, and to destroy us both. The greatest soldier of Rome next to you has been cruelly maligned and ill-used. Yes! I grieve to see him caged like a wild beast when he would be your best and truest comrade. I admit that I have sought to restore him to his true place. I have not seen him—but—yes!—I have been in communication with him. But for what purpose? My own beloved friend, the Lady Hypatia Palæologos, may be persuaded to accept him as a husband, now that he is a lonely widower. John presses his

suit, but her family have other views. My own messages to John were to urge him to come and win the lady himself. But your stern orders to keep him caged in Cappadocia have prevented him from approaching the city. Countermand this, my Lord. Bring your best general back to your side. Let us marry him to this noble and beautiful woman whom I love as a sister myself. And then send John to command an army in Syria. Yield me this, my King, my lover, my husband. John is true, as I am true. Do not listen to the falsehoods of our enemies—to those who seek to displace us in your trust and in your love."

And she clasped him, and sank upon his neck in tears.

Slowly, quietly, but resolutely, Nicephorus unclasped the woman's hands, and stood musing silently and sadly. At last he said, "John Tzimisces shall be summoned to me. I will hear what he has to say from his own lips."

Tzimisces was summoned, but no reconciliation was effected. He furiously denied all traitorous machinations against the throne, and made blunt denial of any interviews with Theophano. He then inveighed with passion against the orders to keep him in retirement. A violent scene ensued, and the old friends and comrades parted in wrath. Nicephorus found Tzimisces to be mutinous, if not in actual revolt. He placed him in arrest on the Asian frontier across the Propontis.

The Basileus was preparing to return to the front when dispatches arrived with the startling news that General Bourtzes had stormed Antioch, and was master of the great city and all its contents and resources. Great rejoicings were ordered by the official world, and Nicephorus attended the ceremony of thanksgiving in the cathedral with great pomp. And the news was hardly made public, when fresh dispatches announced that the Emir of Aleppo, despairing of overcoming Petros Phocas, was ready to make his submission, and to become the tributary and satrap of the Basileus of Roum.

Nicephorus Phocas was now at the culmination of his great crusade against Islam. His arms had triumphed everywhere; and for two generations the Moslem advance was effectually repelled. The Government made every effort to celebrate these triumphs, and Bourtzes was about to be received with honours and rewards, when Leo's agents discovered that he also had been engaged in a new conspiracy into which Tzimisces and others had been drawn by Theophano herself. Thus Bourtzes

was disgraced and dismissed from office. Much as the people of Byzantium loved pageants and public rejoicings, their irritation at the pressure of taxation and the machinations of the monks increased rather than allayed the general discontent. And all the efforts of Leo the Curopalates and the rest of the ministers failed to rekindle the national enthusiasm.

In the vain hope of touching the public mind, they caused the venerable Bardas Phocas to be carried round in the constant services and *Te Deums*, which were sung in the churches. He was now more than ninety years of age; and as his snow-white head on his shrivelled body was borne along in the crowds, he seemed to be a corpse being carried to a tomb, rather than the living remnant of a hero whose name lived in every field of Asian warfare.

But the strain was too much for the last flicker of the veteran's spirit. He was borne back fainting to the Palace and laid on the couch from which he never rose again. Nicephorus watched long hours beside his father, in hopes of having some last words that he could remember before they were parted for ever.

On the third day some signs of life returned. The old man opened his eyes, and saw his glorious son. He faintly smiled, and said, "I go hence with joy and thankfulness of heart—Rome lives, and for evermore shall live. The people of Christ have risen from their long night of defeat. Farewell, my son, I go to tell the martyrs that their deaths are avenged." The smile settled on his lips. The veteran was dead. The Basileus bent down and kissed the lifeless forehead of his sire. He felt alone—at peace—with his work on earth completed.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LAST AGONY

The long funeral procession had now returned to the Sacred Palace from the Church of the Holy Apostles in the same order and in all the solemn magnificence with which the patriarch Bardas had been laid to his rest. The Emperor, with his robes of state concealed in an ample black cloak, strode on in proud and moody silence through the gorgeous halls which now seemed to him to mock his despair. As he followed the coffin of his father to the sepulchre, he had heard the muttered curses of the mob which thronged the streets; and even as he had lifted with his own hands the shrunken corpse of his heroic sire and laid it reverently in the royal sarcophagus wherein it was to lie—even as he took his last gaze on his father's face, and covered it with the consecrated cloth for ever—Nicephorus saw hatred and vengeance around him in the eyes of the monks and priests within the shrine.

He knew himself now to be a man hated, deserted, and betrayed: most unjustly, most cruelly, in spite of all that he had done for the State and for the people. But he marched along through the lowering yet cringing mob with an air of haughty defiance and resolute purpose, till he had completed his part in the great ceremonial. The guard of honour filed aside at the courtyard and drew up at the porch; the officers of state and great dignitaries prostrated themselves in due turn and took their way apart. Slowly the crowd of chamberlains, nobles-in-waiting, priests, secretaries, and ministers in their order of rank made their obeisance and quitted the Sovereign as he passed to the private chambers of the Palace.

In silence and gloom the Emperor stalked on, with but formal acknowledgments of the endless obeisances he received from the train, till he reached the inmost chambers of the vast Palace, accompanied now by none but his confessor, his brother

Leo, the chief chamberlain, and two body servants of his household. Here at last the strength of the Chief seemed utterly exhausted. They took from him his cloak of mourning, his diadem and sword of state, blazing with precious stones; they unlaced the Imperial buskins and the golden mail in which he was encased. He seemed eager to fling from off him his royal trappings. And at last, in the rough shirt which he ever chose to wear beneath his robes, bare-headed, unshod, the mighty Basileus of Rome sank into a couch with a groan and covered his face with his massive sunburnt hands.

Long the attendants watched their master in perplexity and fear. He spoke not, nor gave any sign. At length his brother Leo, presuming on their kinship and his own high office, broke silence and ventured to remonstrate with his terrible Chief. "By the Mother of God, most August Autocrator, we adjure you to shake off grief, and take heed of the manifold perils that surround your throne and life. We have reached the third month, foretold as fatal by the mysterious hermit who flung the paper into your lap in the porch of Hagia Sophia. All our efforts to trace him have failed, and we now believe him to have been a conspirator in disguise luring you on to your doom. You are surrounded with traitors, intrigues, and plots. And the nearest to you of all may be consenting to them." But here a groan, smothered by the clenched hands of the Basileus himself, checked Leo's words. The Emperor raised his head, glared on his brother like a lion at bay, but spoke not, and again covered his face and sank upon his couch. After some minutes of awed silence, the Curopalates resumed: "My duty to your Majesty compels me to unravel all the plots that are being hatched against you, all the omens and portents which threaten your star. The eclipse of last week, which your Imperial Majesty treats with just contempt, has spread panic, suspicion, and treason throughout the realm. The storm of last night, wherein our hero-father passed away, has desolated the towns of Propontis and has covered its shores with wrecks. I hear to-day of the earthquake in Asia Minor whereby whole provinces have been covered with ruins and dead bodies. The tale of calamities and omens will be shown your Majesty by the Great Chamberlain here, who has been furnished with particulars. And whilst the provinces are languishing and restless, the city is

a hotbed of treason, rebellion, and intrigue. And of all this the author and head is no other than your false lieutenant and rival, the Armenian John, the deadly foe of our house—who aspires to your throne—nay, to your——" But so fierce a spasm shook the frame of the Emperor, and his gaze upon his brother was at once so terrible and yet so tragic, that Leo dared not finish his sentence. Nicephorus spoke not, but he stretched forth his hand with a sign of impatience and fatigue. Leo on bended knee took his brother's hand, pressed it to his lips and withdrew.

A long silence followed till the Great Chamberlain, conceiving himself appealed to by the Emperor's brother, ventured to approach his master. "Will not your Mightiness deign to listen to the report I hold in my hands of the dangerous signs which man and the Saints are holding up to our eyes? I have here the particulars of riots in fourteen provinces, the holy places destroyed by the earthquake, and the statements of priests, soldiers, and officers of the Empire as to imminent rebellion. Will your Majesty be pleased to hear the story of their fears and their warnings?" The Basileus groaned again but spoke not. He slowly shook his head, waved back his hand: and the High Chamberlain retired with the usual prostrations and forms of reverence.

The confessor still stood his ground beside his imperious penitent. The venerable monk Zachariah was renowned throughout the Empire for his austere piety and martyr-like sufferings for Christ's sake, and was one of the few monks for whom Nicephorus had real esteem and trust. He motioned to the attendants to withdraw, and in a voice of deep emotion he said, "Mighty Lord, hear the words of me who am but a worm in thy sight, as thou art but a worm in the sight of God. Thy perils are many and great, but thy sins also are many and great. Thou hast committed deadly sin in taking to wife the widow of a dead man to whose child thou art father-in-God, a woman who would enter a third adulterous marriage if she were rid of thee. Thou hast robbed the churches and the patrimonies of monks and priests to carry on thy endless wars at the distant frontiers of this realm. Make peace with thy enemies, and cease in thy old age to be a man of blood. Restore to the churches and monasteries the wealth that thy tax-gatherers have wrung from Holy Church. Put away the adulteress, the infidel, the whore who lies beside

thee and pollutes thy soul. And the Mother of God will yet intercede that you may be kept safe in His holy keeping." The Emperor sat silent and motionless as a stone. And, without a word more from penitent or confessor, Zachariah raised his hands to heaven in attitude of prayer, and slowly, without a gesture passing between them, he withdrew from the presence.

Then the Emperor raised his head, with a look of fierce passion, struggling to be calm. With the old voice of command, as he had so often ordered a last charge on a bloody field, he said, "Leave me, begone all! set double guards at the doors of this chamber, and till I call again, let no man pass into this place—no man on pain of death—no! and no woman either. I have spoken. I choose to be alone this night!"

When the doors were closed and all lights extinguished, save the lamp that burned night and day before the *ikon* of the Theotokos, Nicephorus arose and turned towards the image of the Virgin. With bare head, bare arms and feet, in his rude camp shirt, he looked in the dim light like some hermit in a rocky cave by the Thessalonican coast. His face was haggard and drawn with sorrow and care. His weary eyes drooped in their dark cavernous rings. His white hair and grizzled beard contrasted strangely with his swarthy skin tanned with the suns and scarred with the storms of Asia over fifty years. But his huge frame and shaggy limbs gave him still the majestic air of a veteran chief. He flung himself down before the miraculous image, kissed the feet of the Divine Mother, and groaned forth this prayer—

"Hear me! hear me! Mary, Mother of God, and turn the heart of thy Son to listen to the outpouring of my soul. I acknowledge my offences towards men and Mother Church; and my sins of bloodshed and wrath burn into my memory like red-hot irons. But Thou knowest, O God of Mercy and Judgment, for what end were wrought all my sins of slaughter and of punishment. If I have lived with the sword in my right hand and have waded through torrents of human blood from my childhood upwards, Thou knowest that it was in defence of Christian people against infidels, heretics, and barbarians. If I slew, it was those who would have slain Thy beloved and faithful people, the priests of Thy altars, and the mothers of children baptised in Thy faith. Sinner as I am, Thou wilt not forget that

my right arm has saved Thy Holy City, this realm of Rome, and Thy Orthodox Church planted by Thy Son to save this heathen world. And the offerings that I pressed from the wealth of Mother Church were never taken for me or for mine, O Lord! but to arm my soldiers in their war with the False Prophet!"

So groaned out his confession of sins, this fierce proud soldier and ruler. Even in the act of acknowledging his offences and seeking for pity from the Throne of Mercy, the consciousness of all his achievements and the sense of his supreme mastery of the Empire made his look fire up with the pride of commander, ruler, and despot. And as the feeling of his abandonment and wrongs burst full on his thoughts he sank down prostrate before the image of the Virgin Mother.

"Thou only knowest, O most holy and loving of those above, thou only knowest how lonely and forlorn is he whom men call the mighty Autocrator of Rome. All—all have forsaken me. My heroic father, the last pillar of our house, is laid in the grave, whence at my death he may be torn again and dishonoured. Him only could I trust. My brother, whom I have loaded with honours and gifts, works now for himself, and would spur me on to crush his rival, the Armenian John. The hatred of the people has been drawn down on me by him. Help! pity! O Mother of God, the most lonely and abandoned of all those who truly serve and call on thee. Virgin most pure, most perfect, most holy, thou wilt not forsake him who has ever held thy image in his heart, who from his youth up has sinned not in the flesh—sinned not unless thou countest it sin to love her whom Holy Church has blessed and consecrated to be bone of my bone."

The last words seemed wrung from the clenched lips of the Chief as if it were blood strained from his veins. And he groaned out the phrase "blessed and consecrated to be bone of my bone" with prolonged spasm of rage and pain, as if they were words wrung from him on the rack. The mighty frame of the hero was convulsed with tremors and fierce clenching of the limbs. He fell prone on the ground, and sobbed and groaned in silence.

"Holy Mother of God," he muttered at length, "is it indeed a sin to love a woman, to desire her to wife? Then truly have I sinned as none ever sinned before. I was a man in years and in high place and power when I first saw her. From that hour

I was her slave—melting like wax at her sight, trembling in her presence, thrilled to the bone at the sound of her voice. Never in my life, as thou knowest, O most Holy Mother, has woman beguiled me; and but for her I am spotless as this ancient hermit who condemns me. My sin was to have taken to wife her to whose child I was father-in-God. The holy fathers have pronounced on me this judgment; and, in my passion, I have visited my wrath upon them. Forgive, forgive this offence, which comes from excess of love. Forgive—even as He on earth forgave one who had loved much. Am I not stricken enough for this sin? She loves me not, has never loved me. Holy Mother! she loathes me and no longer seeks to hide it from me. She loves some other—whom?—has she betrayed me in deed as she has in thought? Can it be?—teach me, open my eyes—thou knowest, O Holy and Immaculate Virgin, thou knowest if she be false in body as in heart. I cannot watch her: I dare not pry and probe into my shame like a cuckold huckster. She may be false—but I will never stoop to suspect. The wife of Cæsar must be untouched by evil fame—untouched—aye, or dead. It is agony enough to know that she loves me not—she loathes me, O God!—and I love her madly still. Holy Mother, as thou knowest, I have forsworn her bed—never in life will I touch woman where love is not, or is not from each to each. I tremble still in her sight. Holy Mother, teach me if I must still endure this pain—if I have thy command to put her away as the false ones are left alone with thee and the Saints!"

Hour after hour the stricken Cæsar poured forth these prayers and lamentations in spasms of agony and broken groans, stretched on the ground, and grinding his teeth in his wrath and madness. At length exhausted nature could endure no more. The long vigils by his dying father's side, the fatigue of the funeral ceremonies, the terrible conflict of the last few hours, and the ecstasy of confession and of prayer broke down the herculean strength of the veteran, and he sank into a lethargic slumber before the image of the Virgin.

Slowly and silently a small and secret panel in the gilded recess of the great chamber was cautiously opened, enough to admit the hand of a woman. And as the measured breathing of the Cæsar announced that he was not waking, the door was gently opened, and the Empress, in all the fascination of her chamber adornment, stood motionless before her Lord.

She was disrobed for the night, arrayed in half-transparent silken sheen; her exquisite limbs shining like alabaster as the masses of her dark tresses were folded over her bare neck and shoulders. She looked more lovely thus than in all her Imperial robes and jewels. Long she stood in silence, looking down on her sleeping husband, with a bitter smile playing round her chiselled lips, and the hate of a tigress in the gleam of her lustrous eyes. Then she stooped low over him, till her loosened locks fell from around her bosom upon his, and, with a kiss soft as rose-leaves, and warm as sunlight on his brow, she roused the Cæsar from his slumber. He rose from the floor with a look so dazed and yet so terrible that the woman shrank back—still smiling, still enticing, and yet afraid to speak.

"What!" he cried, with a fierce voice, "have my guards, too, betrayed me, or how did you pass, when I had ordered no living soul to come hither, whilst I watched and prayed, after all the toils I have borne?"

"Cæsar would not shut out Cæsar's wife from his side at such a time as this," she answered, with a subtle glance in dulcet tones; "and they did not guard the secret door of passage between our private chambers. Nor yet," she added, as he spoke not, "will her hero, her master, her lover, leave his Theophano in such a night to be sleepless, lonely, disconsolate—forsaken."

Cæsar turned his head away from the maddening sight of the woman he loved so passionately, and yet believed so profoundly to be false; he turned his head from her, closed his eyes again, and groaned a deep sigh that seemed to shake his breast.

But the wily Delilah saw the trembling round the mouth of Cæsar, and the yearning of love in his eyes, even as he had turned from her with a gesture of disdain, and she pressed the advantage which she knew that she retained.

"Will the Majesty of Rome and the Terror of the Infidel be tutored and frightened by these designing priests and their unmanly superstitions? I know that they have put a bar between thee and me, and in their insolence have torn thee from the side of thy true and loving wife. What do these holy eunuchs know of marriage, and of all the peace which the loving wife gives to the soul of the Lord who loves her? Is the Basileus of the World, too, a weakling—like the slaves

who haunt his Palace, and the priests who whine in his shrine?"

She saw how the Sovereign writhed and glowered at such unseemly words, and she shrieked forth—"What! do they insult me too, do they seek to poison your mind, do they tell you that I am no true wife, that I have ceased to love you, would they see me not only abandoned by my Lord but suspected of crime! Holy Mother, can they have dared such infamy? Cæsar, husband, lover, my hero, my saint, am I not your only love? Have I not forsaken all things for you? have I not made you Lord of the World? have I not loved you madly? do I not love you now more passionately than when I was first your slave and lover? Come to me again, let me wind my arms round you, and nurse you to rest after all that you have suffered. Nicephorus, hero, lover! I have borne many things for thee! I have risked my liberty, my honour, my life—even the lives of my sons—certainly their thrones! Thy enemies wait for thee. My enemies watch for me. Thou and I united can defy them. But divided we may both perish at their hands!" And she stooped down again over him, like a crouching leopard over its prey, till the silken drapery almost slid from off her faultless and dazzling form, and he could feel the warmth of her skin and the perfume of her tresses. So fawning and almost purring over his motionless body, again she softly kissed his rugged brow—and then gently, like a beautiful sylph in the dim light, she stole away in silence, just whispering in tones of liquid tenderness and passion, "Come to me—my lover—come!"

Cæsar spoke no word, but when he knew himself to be alone, he rose, and, with a groan, he passed to the secret door in the panel which Theophano had left ajar. He gently but firmly closed it—it had no bolt or fastening on that side within—and he paced the chamber in moody silence and grim contortion of face. Then he summoned an attendant.

"Place double guards at the portal of this chamber. Let none enter on pain of death. Leave me. I pass the night here, alone."

The attendant was preparing for the night the Imperial bed, when the Emperor broke forth on him—

"No, not there. I sleep in no bed; but as I have so long slept in my camp, on the floor. Place in this dark corner hard by beneath the image of Theotokos the panther's skin which I

have had from my father, whereon the hero was wont to sleep. Here, I say, give me my arms—at least my sword and dagger. Place them as of old, on the beast's skin."

"Will your Majesty choose to have them brought? Her Imperial Majesty bade them take sword and dagger to her own chamber, and they lie beside the great couch."

"Leave them! Leave me! Give me the consecrated cloak of the ancient hermit. So! I will fold it round me, for it has powers to ward off evil. Go."

Folded in the consecrated robe of the saint, Nicephorus flung himself again on the floor before the crucifix and sobbed forth in broken whisperings his last prayer—

"Son of God, who died for sinners, who now at the right hand of the Father seest the most secret things of every heart, look down into my tortured soul—and judge me in Thy Justice and Mercy! If I have loved an unworthy woman, it was in love and honour that I yielded myself to her power. Thou only knowest how false she is, and Thou knowest all that I have borne at her hands, that I have done her no wrong nor have sought to visit on her or hers my just indignation and wrath. If I still desire to live and to reign, Thou knowest that my life is given to maintain this Christian realm, to beat off the heathen who rage round it to destroy and pollute Thy people. If my life may yet help Thy Church and Thy realm, keep me alive still, albeit in agony and despair. If my death may advance Thy inscrutable purpose, O God, let my blood be shed for men even as was Thy own, though I be the vilest of Thy created beings. Thy will be done, Thy Kingdom come!"

Long in the dark hours of night, the Emperor wrestled in spirit with his Maker. And then, rolling round him the shaggy and tattered mantle of the Holy Man, he lay down upon the panther's hide on the floor and at last sunk exhausted in profound sleep.

CHAPTER XXXII

CLYTEMNESTRA

A STORM more fierce than any in that winter of storms was raging over the city and the Sacred Palace. Furious gusts from the north swept over the Euxine, and coursed down the Bosphorus laden with sleet and snow. The waters round the Golden Horn were lashed into foam, and dashed in showers of spray against the battlements of the city. Amidst the roar of the wind against the casements and the creaking of doors and shutters, there were confused noises, hoarse whispers, and strange cries along the corridors and ante-chambers of the Palace. The Empress herself was seen from time to time gliding from chamber to chamber, her tigress eyes agleam with anxiety and eagerness, her lovely face more marble-like in its pallor than was usual, and her lips moving from time to time with uncontrolled emotion. She bent low and conferred in hurried whispers, first with one, then with another of her women.

The private apartments of the Empress consisted of an ante-chamber opening into a gorgeous bedchamber, in the centre of which stood a royal couch with purple hangings and surmounted by a golden eagle. Around it were vast chests and wardrobes filled with the robes and adornments of the Empress. Within the principal chamber, shut off by small doors, were two inner recesses: one a tiny chapel with a life-size painting of the Man-God upon the Cross standing high above the altar, which was covered with rare mountings and cloth—the other a bath and attiring recess, hung with the instruments for the royal ablutions.

A low but distinct knock was heard without, and at a nod from Theophano her aged nurse stealthily advanced to the door and led in a figure completely enveloped in one of the immense mourning cloaks that had been used in the funeral of that day. "Enter and approach, Master of the Eunuchs," said the

Sovereign; "I have a charge for thee this night!" She motioned to the women to withdraw into the ante-chamber; as the old nurse, who alone had remained, led the veiled figure to the royal presence, and unbuckled the mantle which concealed both face and figure. "It is no work to-night for an eunuch," she hissed, "but for a man, a soldier, a hero! Michael Bourtzes, glorious victor of Antioch, art thou ready to do the deed which shall avenge thee on thy persecutor and place thee at the head of Rome? Art thou ready, as I am ready, and these true men here?"

Michael Bourtzes, for it was indeed that illustrious chief in full armour, who had been disguised and introduced as Master of the Eunuchs, flung back the sable mantle, and drawing from its sheath his dagger, with a look of fierce passion and proud disdain, kissed the white hand of his mistress, and murmured, "Royal lady, I am come to slay or to be slain." She glowed on him with cruel joy in her gleaming eyes, and led him smiling into the chapel. Then, raising the embroidered cloth over the altar, with the pathetic image of the Divine Mother worked on it in gold, "Here is your comrade," she said, and showed him, concealed beneath the altar cloth, Balantes the taxiarch, who had been hidden in his coat of mail within the very altar itself. The iron nerves of Bourtzes, who had faced death on a hundred bloody fields, did not quail at so strange a device, and he silently obeyed the Empress when she bade him stand upon the altar, and conceal himself behind the picture of the Redeemer that hung above it.

In a lull of the storm the low knock was heard again at the door, and again the aged nurse hastened to unloose the bolts. "Bring in my tiring women for the night!" called the Empress; and four maids in loose robes and of somewhat unusual stature and masculine air advanced into the centre of the bedchamber. "Welcome, stout friends," fawned the Empress, "all goes well, and the hour of deliverance is at hand!" as one by one the maids slipped off their woman's attire and stood forth stalwart men-at-arms, in full array for work and combat. "We want now but John Tzimisces himself; but the watchers expect him minute by minute."

The Empress had hardly uttered these words, when the unmistakable tramp of armed heels was heard along the corridor without. The four disguised bravoes looked around with rage and fear, under a sudden impulse that they had been

caught in a trap, and were about to be slain. Each man fingered his weapon uneasily; and had Theophano at that moment showed signs of conscious treachery, more than one dagger would have been planted in her heart. The crone rushed to the chamber door to secure the bolts. "Hold them in parley whilst you may," hissed the Empress, "I will secure our friends!" "Stand close, and fear not," she whispered to the two chiefs in the chapel. "Follow me, my men," she said to the four bravoes, as she dragged them within the bath-room and closed the door from inside.

In the meantime, loud knocking and high words were heard in the ante-chamber, and voices of command rang through the private apartments. "Open at once in the name of our Sovereign Lord Nicephorus, Augustus Ever-Victorious. Here is the order to search every corner of this Palace for concealed traitors, countersigned by the Master of the Household! Open, or we force these doors!"

"Not the private chambers of her August Majesty," screamed the crone, "and her Sacred Person now within her couch."

"Yea! her Majesty's chamber above all, and her bed if we choose," shouted the angry voice of the Captain of the Guard, striking the door with the hilt of his sword.

The noise without grew so loud that the terrified women opened the doors, and crouched aside like vixens caught in a trap. "A mysterious warning has just reached the Emperor that traitors lie this night concealed within the Palace, and our orders are peremptory to search every corner of it, even to the Imperial bed and closet." Nor was this a vain threat. The Captain of the Guard, a man devoted to his master, whose life he had saved in the siege of Crete, ordered his men to ransack the ante-room, and then the chamber of the Empress. They were no novices at the work; every corner was probed; their daggers struck through every tapestry and curtain; each recess and chest, closet and niche, was tried and pierced through and through by sharp eyes and sharper knives. The coverlets of the Imperial couch were flung aside; and, it being evident that her Majesty was not within it, the hangings, curtains and ornaments were separately examined by sight and by steel.

Nothing had been found. "Now open these two inner recesses, unless we are to break into them with our halberds!"

said the Captain to the crone. "What! the shrine of Christ and His Mother?" shrieked the old woman, partially opening the door of the chapel, and standing across it fiercely herself. "Are you sacrilegious infidels about to profane the holy retreat of the Mother of God? Look, ye miscreant sons of Ishmael and Hagar, do ye see aught but our Blessed Redeemer and the Holy Virgin who bore Him?" The rude soldier and his men shrank from the sacrilege of disturbing the Christ and the Mother of Christ in their consecrated shrine; and they hesitated to pull aside the miraculous picture of the Crucified One, behind which Bourtzes held his breath, nor did they venture to raise the altar cloth that concealed the mailed form and blanched face of Balantes the taxiarch.

"Then open this," shouted the Captain, planting himself firmly before the closed door of the remaining recess. "What!" shrieked the crone, "you shameless brigand and foul dog, would you thrust your brutal limbs into the very bath of her Sacred Majesty—and she at this moment within it, in the very act of bathing her Inviolate Person? Our August Lord, the Autocrator, will know how to punish such brutality and insolence to his adored Consort!"

"I know my duty," said the Captain; "if we have any Empress here," he added, with a rude sneer, "she wears a beard and carries steel. Open, I say, or, by Saint Michael, this door comes down with a crash."

But here, to the unbounded astonishment of the Captain of the Guard, as he stood close against the entrance ready to force his way, the door was flung open from within; and there, in front of the bath, facing the soldier, stood the Empress herself in all her majesty of port and imperious pride. She stood there like Aphrodite as she rose out of the Paphian waves, as naked and as lovely as the Queen of Cyprus, the water of her bath still dripping from her rosy limbs, and the masses of her hyacinthine tresses curling around that form of Parian marble. She stood there, smiling a deadly smile of scorn and triumph, a vision as it were of the Cnidian statue of Praxiteles, or Phryne, when she stepped forth from the billows on the shore of Eleusis.

"Back!" she called aloud; "back! brutal hound, who would violate the sanctity of thy Sovereign's bed! He shall rebuke the outrage which you have offered to my person; the very eyes which have polluted my purity shall be burnt out with

red-hot irons, and your manhood torn off and thrown to the dogs. Begone! till I can have thee made one who can never see woman more." And she closed the door of the bath-room, which she had held half open, so as to conceal the four bravoes behind it, having hastily covered them with the cloths and carpets by which the bath was provided.

Aghast at so terrible a threat, and struck dumb with so extraordinary an apparition, the Captain of the Guard withdrew with a sense of unpardonable crime, to which, in his innocence, he supposed that his duty had exposed him. He staggered down the corridor like a man who had seen the dead rise from a grave, perplexed and bewildered—pondering if his best chance lay in seeking the Emperor in person or in making his own flight secure. If the Mother of God had spoken to him directly from her image he could not have been more amazed. And soon the tramp of the guards was heard to resound in the distance and at last died away in the corridors, echoing only with the moanings of the storm.

The Imperial chamber was hardly free from its intruding visitors when the Empress burst into it from the bath in a loose wrapper which she had flung over her limbs, radiant with the success of her stratagem, and on fire to begin the work of the night. She ordered the four bravoes to keep close in the bath-room, and rushing to the chapel she called to Balantes to come forth from the altar, and to Bourtzes to descend from behind the miracle-working picture of the Redeemer. The veteran thrust forth his huge form from behind the panel, but in so doing he burst it from its fastenings, and in his struggle to save himself from falling, he tore the sacred image from the wall, and it fell to the marble floor with a resounding crash. At the sound all started in dread—the women, the attendants, the soldiers in hiding, and the two generals—and dismay made the blood of the stoutest run chill. The Christ was broken in fragments—the embossed ornaments upon it and its heavy setting lay on the marble in confusion, and the head of the Saviour, bleeding in its crown of thorns, rolled at the feet of Theophano herself.

Even the stout Bourtzes was aghast at the sight of the sacrilege of which he had been guilty, and the rest were cowering, as if the avenging God were about to consume them with His thunderbolt. Men who had never quailed before the sons of Ishmael were struck dumb with horror at the

destruction of the miraculous *ikon*. The women screamed and sobbed, and the bravoes quivered like whipped hounds. Theophano sprang forwards, and, seizing a dagger from the trembling hand of a soldier, shouted to them, "What! Must a woman teach men to be firm? Are you scared like children by the noise of fallen furniture? Shall I reveal the plot this very instant to his Majesty, now sleeping behind this panel, and have you all blinded and mutilated by to-morrow's sun? Are you all priests or monks, to be frightened by a few broken bits of painted wood and stone! This is nothing but old lumber!" she shrieked, as she crushed with her heel the fragment at her feet, and stamped in derision on the face of the Saviour. "Go on," she cried, "if ye are men and warriors, and care to live another day; but where is the leader himself?—where is Tzimisces? Every instant may bring death to him—to us all—death and torture of the sharpest that can be devised by his Sacred Majesty, the Vicegerent of Christ on earth!"

With these words, in an agony of eagerness and excitement, she rushed to the ante-room, where the narrow window of a tower looked out upon the sea below. The storm was still howling along the Bosphorus, and the watchers, livid with anxiety, were straining their eyes through the darkness, if they could see any sign of a boat in the waters. "Nothing can float this night in such a gale," said Bourtzes, "it is idle to wait for John. Let us to work this instant, for delay will cost us our lives!"

"Wait, I bid you," cried Theophano in fury, "wait for Tzimisces to lead—or I pass to the Emperor myself and denounce you as his murderers here!" Bourtzes looked doubtfully at Balantes, and Balantes looked at Bourtzes, but neither dared brave the woman at bay. Each hesitated and submitted to her will.

At this time a suppressed cry broke out from the watchers that a small ship could be descried battling with the billows and nearing the quay, where a tiny port admitted a boat to the very foot of the turret. The Empress flung herself into the embrasure, and, with the gesture of a Mænad, shouted a hoarse note of triumph, "It is he, my hero, my own John, my saviour."

With wonderful skill and good fortune, the stout ship was driven into the small dock, and in the shelter of its quay was

able to discharge its three passengers. The basket and tackle with its windlass that was often used for such ends was swiftly lowered from the window, and soon was drawn up swaying in the gale but deftly guided from below. And at length, with hair-breadth escapes and astonishing feats of strength and adroitness, John Tzimisces crept from the basket and was dragged into the narrow embrasure. He leapt into the room, and, as he was, all dripping with salt foam, chilled with the snow and in his coat of mail, he flung himself desperately into the open arms of the Empress. "My hero, my avenger, my Lord, my Sovereign that is to be!" fawned Theophano, pressing her lips to his in a torrent of wild kisses. "The hour is come, and the Man," she cried; "draw your weapons and follow me."

The private bedchamber of the Emperor was silent and dark, dimly lit in one corner by the ceremonial lamp which ever burned with a dull veiled flame before the altar and image of Christ. The double doors and heavy tapestries which covered the exits to the corridor on one side and to the public hall of audience on the other side effectually shut out the sound of the guards who still kept watch without. The chamber seemed empty and completely closed. Stealthily and without a breath of sound, the small and secret panel in the recess through which the Empress had entered and retreated some hours before was gradually opened inch by inch; and an exquisite white hand, covered with rubies and pearls, could be seen to be holding it ajar. Silence followed, broken only by the moaning of the surf below, and then the lovely face of Theophano was stealthily thrust in the opening. She was pale as marble; but the transparence of her skin, and the absolute perfection of her features, made her the very image of Herê as figured by the hand of Scopas—but a Herê about to strike some profane intruder. The wonderful eyes of Theophano with their deep sapphire glow had never been seen so full of fire and life. It was no marble head of woman that men saw that night, but the head of some lovely Gorgon—with the flashing eyes of the tigress calculating her spring. Assured at last that the weary Nicephorus was buried in sleep, she opened the narrow panel till it admitted the traitors one by one into the sombre chamber.

Bourtzes and Balantes passed in first, closely followed by John Tzimisces, and behind him stole into the darkness the four men-at-arms. All had their weapons drawn. At a sign from Tzimisces they surrounded the royal bed on all sides at once,

and as the dim light seemed to betray the person of the Emperor beneath the coverlets, Bourtzes, Balantes, and John, at a sign from the latter, struck their daggers heavily into the pile of clothes. Thrice they struck in the dim light, but not a thing moved, nor did they feel the stir of living being. The dagger of John had inflicted a flesh wound in the arm of Bourtzes, whose passion was fired at the sight of his own blood. They tore the coverlets aside and flung them on the floor. The bed was empty, and no sign of the Emperor's presence could be perceived.

The three traitors stared at each other with wild eyes; and, brave as they all were, they felt their hearts beat loud. "We are betrayed by this fiend," cried Bourtzes, in a hoarse whisper, "she has lured us here for her own evil purpose; let us slay her in her sin, even if it cost us our lives." And Bourtzes and Balantes glared upon Tzimisces, as if they would accuse him of being an accomplice of the woman in the plot to entrap them. Tzimisces himself was at a loss, and the four bravoes stood livid with confusion, as furtive as rats in a trap. It seemed to all that they were on the verge of a desperate combat amongst themselves, or headlong flight by flinging themselves out into the sea and terrace below.

Then the panel door, behind which Theophano had been listening breathless, opened again, and the Empress passed in, moving swiftly and noiselessly in her bare feet, wrapped in a loose red mantle and dishevelled tresses, her eyes gleaming like coals of fire beneath her marble brow. She looked like some Mænad leading a mad rout of furious satyrs. She spoke no word, but she waved her bare arm and pointed across the chamber to the corner where, on the panther's skin, and concealed under the shaggy mantle of the hermit, Nicephorus lay motionless in sleep.

Bourtzes and Balantes advanced with drawn swords and death in their eyes, followed by the men-at-arms, whilst John Tzimisces stood by the couch to give the word of command. "Strike the tyrant," he hissed in a hoarse whisper. Balantes, with a savage kick of his cavalry boot, struck the sleeping Emperor in the side. He started convulsively from the floor, and struggled on to his elbow, gazing fiercely at the assassins, as his cap fell from his head and disclosed in the dim light his white locks and beard. At that moment, with a horrid curse, the sword of Bourtzes descended on the brow of the veteran,

gashing his nose and cheek and lips, and horribly mangling his face. He sank down blinded with the blood, and agonised with the wound, gasping out, "Mother of God—help—help!" The bravoes seized him by the legs and sought to force the fainting body to kneel before the Armenian, who sate on the couch in an attitude of mock judgment. But the mutilated hero sank prone on the floor, which he bathed in his blood, faintly gasping out the words "Help! Mother of God!—Help!"

Tzimisces spurned him with his mailed foot, and all his pent-up rage and hatred burst forth in one cry of triumph. "Tyrant! traitor! miscreant! Why didst thou play me false? Thou owest to me thy glory, thy victories, thy throne! Without me thou wouldst be nothing. It is I who beat thy enemies, it is I who placed thee here, and set thee on the throne which thou hast disgraced. And all my services have been repaid by injuries, and my benefits answered by insults. Envy of a braver man, jealousy and suspicion have turned thee into a monster of ingratitude and a by-word of falseness and cruelty." With these words John, in his rage, trampled on his fallen chief; and, hoarse with passion, he tore handfuls from his beard, screaming aloud, "All loathe thee—thy people, thy comrades, thy servants—aye, and thy wife," he added, with a savage grin, stamping on the mangled and bloody face. "Mother!—Mother of God!" groaned the dying man, with his last gasp.

Maddened with rage and pent-up vengeance, the conspirators beat the unconscious body on the floor. They smashed his jaw, and broke in his teeth with the pommel of their swords, and hacked him limb by limb. Then John, sweeping once more aloft his dripping sword, smote him through the skull so that the brains poured forth.

The noise of the murder and the hoarse cries of the murderers at last penetrated to the guard in the corridors outside. They, not daring to break in without command, sent for help and orders to the main corps on guard in the outer court. These Varangians, wholly consisting of Northern soldiers, devoted to the person of the Emperor *de facto*, rushed forth to break into the Palace by the bronze portal, which they found barred by the conspirators. The rumour of a Palace intrigue ran through the city. Wild mobs, mixed with soldiers and priests, gathered round the Palace walls, and fierce cries were raised by the surging multitudes below. Leo, the brother of Nicephorus, was

hastening to the gates with a band of Varangians, and followed by his partisans.

All at once a powerful light, cast by many torches, is seen by the mob below at the window of the Palace. John Tzimisces, already in the Imperial purple, and fully robed, appears before the crowd beneath, and as he withdraws from the confused shouts they send forth, Theodorus, his lieutenant, leapt into the window, and there brandishes in sight of all the mangled, bloody head of him who, but an hour before, was Emperor of the Roman world. The mob below uttered hoarse yells of different import —joy mingled with horror. But amazement and fear prevailed. The Varangian guardsmen stood to arms, impassive, waiting for orders from the Emperor. Neither politics, nor rights, nor dynasties troubled them. They were ready to die in defence of a living Autocrat; they would not avenge a dead one. Wulf, the son of Sigurd, their chief, cried out aloud—"When an Emperor is crowned and gives the word, we will march and fight. We take no orders from a corpse!"

Seeing the Varangians stubbornly impassive, and the chief nobles bewildered, the vast crowd of the city became paralysed with fear, and gradually melted away. Black clouds laden with sleet from the Euxine swept across the turbid sky, and the storm howled round the gloomy battlements of the Sacred Palace. Snow now lay thick on the ground and covered the terraces below. The headless corpse of the mighty Lord of Rome, maimed, bloody, and crushed out of all resemblance to man, was flung from the Palace window in a heap, and lay all day a ghastly sight on the ground, staining the snow with its gore. And above it at the window dangled on a chain in the wind the mutilated head of Nicephorus, Ever-Victorious, that head of which the sight had so often struck terror into the ranks of the Saracens, and had so often, on many a wavering field, given new life to the warriors of Rome and of Christ.

CHAPTER XXXIII

RETRIBUTION

The blood had hardly ceased to flow from the wounds of the murdered Emperor when the conspirators hurried from Boucoleon, the scene of their crime, to the great halls of the Sacred Palace in order to enthrone a new Autocrator in the person of John the Armenian. All had been carefully prepared by the arts of Theophano and the skill of Tzimisces. His agents and ministers hurried about the throng of grandees and officials, loading some with gifts, some with offices, all with promises and seduction. Tzimisces was hastily robed in the Imperial purple, and adorned with the regal insignia—he was shod in the vermilion buskins, and crowned with the august diadem of high state. The venerable Patriarch had been summoned to his office, and serried ranks of chamberlains, officers, spathaires, priests, and eunuchs were gathered together in the Golden Throne-room.

With a blare of trumpets and the chant of choristers in unison, Tzimisces advanced amidst his guards and officials, radiant with triumph, but still keen and anxious. The pompous ceremony was begun and hurried through by the eagerness and fear of all present, and amid breathless interest a second *cortège* advanced, more beautiful, if less numerous, than the last: and Theophano appeared amidst her maidens and ladies of honour, smiling like Aphrodite when she entered the Circle of Olympus, more lovely than ever, radiant with pride and love. With pride, for she had achieved the most desperate of all her adventures and crushed her most hated enemy. With love, for she beamed on her new lover with all the self-abandonment of passion. She stepped through the gorgeous hall like the Goddess at once of Empire and of Love, and was about to take her place beside the throne of Tzimisces, on a couch which had been placed on the daïs beside him.

"Holy and Venerable Patriarch," said John, in a voice of command, "your office to-day is twofold. First, you will unite

me and this royal lady beside me in holy matrimony; and then you will pronounce us to the Roman world as anointed Augustus and Augusta."

"That shall never be," rang out the clear voice of the aged Patriarch. "We acknowledge thee, Lord John Tzimisces, our Sovereign Autocrator, and I will anoint thee with the blessing of God and His Begotten Son; but never shall that woman be thy consort on the throne, nor will I join her in holy marriage to thee or any other man. She, the adulteress, the murderess, the profaner of the altar and the Church—she shall not pollute the Sacred Palace again. Drive her forth, in the name of Christ and His Mother, drive her forth from the Sacred Palace—or cease to pretend to it thyself. Choose between God and this woman, John, son of Theophilus. I have spoken in the name of the Saints who watch over us."

Theophano shrieked with rage, and John foamed at the mouth in his indignation and wrath. But as he looked around him in the vast hall and closely scanned the looks of his officers and soldiers, he perceived but too clearly that the Patriarch had the whole audience in his power. Balantes thrust himself through the crowd of grandees around the expectant Emperor, and whispered in a voice of intense excitement in the ear of Tzimisces, "John, son of Theophilus, listen to me—it is life or death to us both. The Patriarch has already suborned the most powerful of the nobles and officials about you; and he will anoint Bourtzes as Autocrator if you refuse to put away the woman. Choose, then, between her, with a dungeon and mutilation to her portion, or the throne of Rome and the world. To hesitate is to be lost!"

As he spoke, Theophano could no longer be held back by the eunuchs around her, and she forced her way to the side of Tzimisces. "John, my own hero, my love, my King, I have loved you wildly since my eyes first saw you. I have sacrificed my life, my soul, my children for you. If I have sinned, it was for love of you, that I might have you to myself, and be free from the monster who outraged us both at once, whom you can only torture any more, now that he is in hell, by letting him see me in your arms, and proving to him at last what is the real love of a woman. Save me, John, take me and hold me. You owe all to me—your life that I saved from his vengeance, your revenge which you have yet to complete, the throne of Rome, from which this wretched monk would debar you, the noblest

Roman of them all. We have won it together. We will mount it and hold it together. Come to me, be the man, the hero that you are. Love me, and you shall see how I can love."

Again the Patriarch spoke in a voice of awful solemnity amidst the most profound silence in the vast hall. "John Tzimisces, thou shalt not pollute the consecrated throne of our Imperial line by dragging into it this unholy woman. Order her this instant into captivity in a convent to be dedicated to God for what remains to her of life on earth. Failing this, with the assent of the chief notables of Rome, I consecrate another as Autocrator and Augustus, vicegerent and tutor of Basil and Constantine, grandsons both of our venerated Constantine Porphyrogennetus. Priests of God and His Mother! nobles and soldiers of Rome! do I speak the words of Justice, of Rome, and of Holy Church?"

A deep murmur of assent rang through the hall, and the keen eye of Tzimisces saw the inevitable sentence on the woman in the countenances of all around. The young Princes, Basil and Constantine, shrank from their mother's women, and took their place by the side of the Patriarch, as fully comprehending the nature of his threat. At that sight Theophano sprang forward like a tigress, struck the child Basil twice across the mouth till his blood gushed forth over her royal robes, screaming, "Are ye all curs and traitors together? Mongrel priest, bastard child, false lover, slaves, eunuchs, I defy ye all, I curse ye all!" And with these words she fell forwards fainting in the arms of the black guards, who seized her, and held her in their unsparing grasp.

John Tzimisces heaved a deep groan, and at last, raising his hand high above his head, in a voice of subdued passion and fierce command, he cried, "Holy Patriarch! ye servants of the Most High! chiefs, nobles, and soldiers of Rome! I acknowledge my sin in that I was seduced by the woman. Take her into strict imprisonment, and let her be immured in a convent in a distant island of the Euxine, so that she never again persuade man to evil, as she was about to persuade myself. Venerable Patriarch, do thy office as of right. Your words have triumphed. The evil one is put away from Rome for ever."

NOTES

THIS story is entitled a romantic Monograph, inasmuch as it attempts, under the form of a romance, to give the history of one of the most striking episodes in the annals of the Middle Ages. All the principal characters in the story are real personages, and all the chief incidents are based on contemporary records. The aim is to give a general picture of the state of Southern and Eastern Europe, and its relation to the advancing power of Islam, in the second half of the Tenth Century.

The defence of Christendom, maintained with varying success by the Later Roman Empire for seven centuries, was in its earlier stages a real Crusade; and it anticipated the Frank and Latin Crusades by many hundred years. On no epoch of this long struggle has this typical form of Crusade been more clearly stamped than on that of the wars in Asia of Nicephorus Phocas, Emperor A.D. 963–969, who is the hero of this tale.

Modern research has enabled our best historians to redress the gross misconception of history which, down to the end of the Eighteenth Century, and even later, perverted the due understanding of the Later Roman Empire, and depreciated the nature and influence of Byzantine civilisation upon the West until its decay about the end of the Eleventh Century. This misconception constituted the dominant error in the study of general history; and it formed a perplexing *lacuna* in following out the evolution of civilisation in Europe. The superficial estimates of Voltaire, Le Beau, and other French writers, the prejudices of Latin and Catholic authorities, and the sophism due to the misuse of the term "Lower Empire," effectually deterred the general reader from taking serious interest in the stupendous events of which New Rome was the organic centre between the age of Justinian and the age of Godfrey or of Cœur de Lion. Even the genius of Gibbon failed to shake off the current misconceptions, which the genius of Scott tended to popularise rather than to correct.

About the middle of the last century the noble *History of Greece* of George Finlay opened a new vein in England. From that time downwards a long succession of foreign scholars—French, German, Russian, Greek, and Oriental—have laboured in the same field, bringing to light a mass of historical, literary, and artistic record which was unknown to the scholars of the Eighteenth Century. Finlay was followed in England by Professors Freeman, James Bryce, Charles Oman, by Dr. Hodgkin and others. But the most decisive work of all has been achieved by Professor Bury, of Cambridge, whose grand work, *The Later Roman Empire*, marks a new epoch in the study of history in England. It was this book which first directed my own attention to the Byzantine historians. In my *Rede Lecture* of 1900, and in Essays in my *Meaning of History*, 1894, I attempted to follow out these suggestions. I may refer any reader who cares to turn to the sources of this epoch to the authorities mentioned in the notes to these two books of mine. The learned and elaborate studies by Gustave Schlumberger, of the French Institute, on the times of Nicephorus Phocas and Basil II., and those of Rambaud, Krause, Krumbacher, Didron, Labarte, Salzenberg, Paspates, on the administration, literature, art, and antiquities of the Byzantine Empire, had given to the history of the Basilian dynasty an interest and importance that was necessarily closed to earlier historians.

Notes

At first I designed a prose narrative of the time of Nicephorus Phocas, which has been so elaborately worked out by M. Schlumberger in his splendid book, *Un Empereur Romain au Xme. siècle.* But it afterwards occurred to me that a general picture of the time might be best conveyed in the form of a romance. The tale closely follows the contemporary authorities, many of the speeches and descriptions being literal translations from the Greek. For the history I accept the authority of Schlumberger, whose life-long devotion to these studies places his judgment in a class by itself. Without his *Nicéphore Phocas* my *Theophano* would assuredly never have appeared.

The best original authority for the life of Nicephorus Phocas is to be found in the first five books of Leo Diaconus' *History.* The same volume in the Bonn edition of the *Corpus scriptorum historiæ Byzantinæ* contains the Treatise of Nicephorus on *Tactics*, his six *Novels*, the five Cantos of Theodosius Diaconus on the *Conquest of Crete*, and Bishop Luitprand's Latin Report of his *Legation to Nicephorus Phocas.* The text of all of these has been constantly used in the compilation of the narrative. The scenery of the places described is based on observations of my own; the antiquities are largely drawn from Labarte, Van Millingen, Salzenberg, Lethaby and Swainson, and for mediæval Rome, Gregorovius and Dr. Hodgkin.

CHAPTER I

The Boy Basileus.]—It was long the custom at Constantinople to have the heir to the throne formally consecrated by the Patriarch in the lifetime of his parent with the titular rank. This was imitated in the West by Popes and Imperatores, as by Otto I. and II.; and no doubt this is the meaning of the "hallowing" of our own Alfred, youngest brother of the royal house of Ethelbert as he was, in the century preceding.

Hunting Garb.]—Specimens of this will be found from contemporary-painted MSS. given by Schlumberger, Bayet, etc.

Theophano.]—The beauty of the woman is insisted on by Leo the Deacon, a very hostile witness, who had seen her. He says, "Of obscure birth, she surpassed all women of her time in beauty and charm of person." She was said to be of a family originally from Lacedæmon, the daughter of one Craterus, whom some call an innkeeper.

Empress.]—The history of the Byzantine Empire is crowded with examples of women raised by marriage to the throne; nor did obscure birth form any impediment to their influence and authority. The Sultanate simply extended the rooted belief that the Sovereign conferred plenary rank on man or woman by the exercise of his will, whatever their birth.

Ring.]—Beautiful examples of such a ring, with its setting and inscription, are given in Schlumberger's works—as of crosses, encolpions, seals, coins, reliquaries, amulets, and caskets.

Romans.]—Throughout the texts and in the inscriptions the Byzantines continually call themselves "Romans." In the story this use of the term is employed to emphasise the fact that the Later Roman Empire insisted on its claim to represent and continue the traditions of Old Rome.

CHAPTER II

The Warden of the Marches.]—Basil Digenes is the only prominent character in the tale who is not strictly an historical personage. The name is taken from an epic poem of the Tenth Century, giving the exploits of a certain legendary hero, Basil Digenes, which no doubt had historical foundation in a real person, who embodied the poetic ideal of the chivalrous Anatolian soldier.

Akritas.]—The *acrai* were the frontiers—the *acritai* were the soldiers who had to defend the frontier region.

Notes

Constantinople.]—From the Seventh to the Thirteenth Century Constantinople was far the largest, wealthiest, most splendid city in Christendom. It much surpassed even Old Rome in the beauty of its situation, in its maritime and commercial capacities, in its vast system of fortification, and in the splendour of its chief Palace and Church. "These riches and buildings were equalled nowhere in the world," says the Spanish traveller, the Jew Benjamin of Tudela in the Twelfth Century. Banduri, Ducange, Villehardouin, Gyllius, Busbecq give us some idea of Old Byzantium.

CHAPTER IV

The Sacred Palace.]—For the design and ornamentation of the Palace and the plan of that quarter of the city, I have closely followed the learned and ingenious work of Labarte, *Le Palais Impérial*, etc. (Paris, 1861). I have also studied what Paspates, Mordtmain, Byzantios, Van Millingen, and Professor Bury have written. The difficulties are perhaps as yet quite irreconcilable as to the entire topography of Old Byzantium. For purposes of the tale, I have thought it sufficient to follow Labarte's elaborate and exhaustive plan.

Varangians.]—I adopt the view of Schlumberger that this famous corps of Northern mercenaries had been already established. See his account of their armament and organisation, *Un Empereur Romain*, pp. 46–49.

Basileia Taxis.]—The accounts of ceremonies, civil and military organisation, are translated literally from the great (*i. e.* big and elaborate) works of the Emperor Constantine, forming three volumes of the Bonn edition of the *Scriptores historiæ Byzantinæ*. These extracts show how largely the ceremonial functions of Europe, especially those of Russia, Hungary, Austria, and even France, have been modelled upon Byzantine types and formulas.

CHAPTER V

The Patriarch.]—The connection between the Emperor and the Holy See at Constantinople, though at times strained and disturbed, was normally far closer than that between Emperor and Pope in the West. In the East the Empire and the Church permanently dwelt side by side, almost in one continuous set of buildings, and acted together in ways which were very rarely possible in Western Europe. At times the Emperor was dominant, as in modern Russia; but at other times the Patriarch was able virtually to control the Emperor. One of the consequences of this close union of State and Church at Constantinople was that public ceremonials of all kinds were cast in devotional moulds, far more ostentatiously, perhaps far more sincerely, than was at all usual in Western Europe, even at the highest point of Catholic fervour. Teuton, Frank, and English princes were far more thorough laymen.

CHAPTER VI

Walls of Constantinople.]—I have had the privilege of examining the marvellous remains of the great fortifications, under the guidance of Dr. Edwin Pears, of Constantinople, who has himself published two valuable books on the Capture of Constantinople: first by the Crusaders in 1204, and then by Mahomet II. in 1453. I have also closely followed the elaborate topographical and archæological study by Professor A. van Millingen, 1899, *Byzantine Constantinople.*

The Coronation.]—The ceremonial forms are taken from the Emperor Constantine's *Basileia Taxis*. It will be noted how closely these ceremonies, which were gradually consolidated into a ritual at Byzantium between the

Fourth and the Ninth Centuries, passed into use in the West; were revived by the Caroline and Saxon dynasties at Rome and Aachen; and have become the type of all royal coronations throughout Europe. The ceremonies customary in Russia are, and always have been, a close imitation of the Byzantine practices. The coronation of our own Edward VII., in 1902, accentuated rather than attenuated the secular rites used a thousand years ago in the inauguration of Constantines, Justinians, Leos, and Basils.

CHAPTER VII

Hagia Sophia.]—The great Church of Constantinople, in my judgment the grandest building in the world, and the one which has exercised the most creative influence over after ages, has been elaborately studied and described by many architects, and by Professor Bury. One of the latest is the scientific treatise by Lethaby and Swainson, 1894, who translate and comment on the curious and suggestive poem by Paul the Silentiary. Those who have not seen the building may get some conception of its form and decorations from Salzenberg's magnificent work *Alt-Christliche—Baudenkmale,* 1854. They may get some idea of its colour from Fossati's prints in his *Aya Sofia.* Photographs are useless, as they destroy the proportion and omit the colour of this sublime fane, which is ruined to the view by the loss of the mosaic pictures, and by the monstrous inscribed screens. I prefer to use the Greek name rather than the odd term Sancta Sophia, which some persons have thought records a Virgin martyr! In English I call it the *Holy Wisdom*, which seems to me to represent the Greek word exactly, although of course what is meant is the Divine Wisdom of the Trinity.

CHAPTER VIII

The Sacred Palace.]—After laborious study of all the attempts to identify the topography of the great Palace, one comes to find insurmountable difficulties to any of the numerous restorations in the absence of such excavations as have cleared up the Palatine at Rome. I hesitate to accept the confident "finds" of Paspates and other local archæologists; nor am I at all satisfied that Labarte has proved all his points. But his scheme is intelligible and consistent, and it rests on a careful study of contemporary writings. For the purposes of the tale, I am content to imagine the form and appearance of the Palace according to Labarte's ingenious restoration.

The Court of Romanus.]—The more we study the *Corpus* of Byzantine history and the many-sided literature, exhaustively analysed by Dr. Krumbacher, the more striking appears the *modern* character of Byzantine life in the Tenth Century. The Court life of Romanus had many features of that of an Italian Duke or Pope of the Renascence. And I can imagine the ceremonial of Constantine Born-in-the-Purple as almost an adumbration of that of Versailles.

CHAPTER IX

The Conquest of Crete.]—The five cantos of Theodosius the Deacon are amongst the most important contemporary documents we have. Fulsome as the language is, and gross as are the violations of Porson's canons, Bentley's, or any others, the iambics are amusing to read, and it is doubtful if better poetry could have been produced in the Tenth Century in any European language. Theodosius, like Leo, systematically uses the name of Romans for Byzantines.

The Muster.]—These details are all found in the works of Constantine.

Notes

CHAPTER X

Descent on Crete.]—This follows Leo and Theodosius, the only strictly contemporary authorities.

CHAPTER XIII

Caliph at Cordova.—For the Ommeyade dynasty in Spain we may consult Dozy, Gayangos' translation of *Al Makri*, De Sacy, and the *History of the Saracens*, by Judge Ameer Ali, Syed, C. I. E. (1899), who writes of course from the Mussulman point of view, and reads the Arabic historians as his native tongue.

CHAPTER XIV

Tactics.]—These passages are translated from the *Manual of War*, bearing the name of Nicephorus. This has been studied with the aid of Professor Oman's *History of the Art of War*, 1898, who adds that this manual might be used to-day on our Indian North-West frontier.

CHAPTER XX

An Emperor's Day.]—The organisation of a Byzantine army is elaborately treated in Constantine's works, and has been admirably explained in Professor Oman's *History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages.*

Embassies at Byzantium.]—This subject is treated at length in Constantine's writings, and has been well explained by Labarte.

The Bulgarian War.]—This episode has been altered by a year or two in chronology; and, with the Sicilian expedition, it forms a rare instance of anachronism in the tale. The transposing of the dates by two or three years has no effect whatever upon the character of the man or the reign.

CHAPTER XXVI

Old Rome.]—Gregorovius' *History of the City of Rome in the Middle Ages* collects the principal authorities for what we know of the decayed city of the Popes in the Tenth Century—far the worst era in the whole history of the Papacy. Lanciani's *Pagan and Christian Rome* deals with the antiquities of that age.

Coronation of Otto II.]—In the absence of adequate contemporary accounts of this ceremony, I assume that it was an imitation of that used at the coronation of Charles the Great. Historians know the incidents of that from Dr. Hodgkin's great and exhaustive work, *Italy and her Invaders*, vol. viii. The whole of this volume treats of the relations of Old and New Rome in the Ninth Century. And the coronations of the Emperors at Rome have been treated with masterly insight by Professor Bryce in the 5th, 6th, and 7th chapters of his *Holy Roman Empire.*

CHAPTER XXVII

Bishop Luitprand.]—His report to his "August and invincible Emperors, the Ottos, etc., etc.," the famous *Legatio*, is one of the most amusing, and also one of the vivid memorials of the time. It is impossible to believe that the angry prelate actually uttered all the taunts and maledictions which he indites in his Philippic, or that much in his description of things is anything but spiteful caricature. I have tried to paraphrase his narrative so

as to make it bear some analogy to what I take to be the real facts. It must always be remembered that Otto I. persevered with his suit, and that Otto II. did marry the Princess Theophano; that she was the mother of the Greco-Roman enthusiast Otto III.; and that she was regarded in Germany as a centre of light, elegance, and civilisation. We should consult Herbert Fisher's *Mediæval Empire* (1898).

CHAPTER XXVIII

Basileus in Council.]—The legal discussions are taken direct from the six *Novels* of Nicephorus, which are so extraordinary in form. It is plain that parts of the first *Novel* are simply drafts of speeches made by the Emperor, either in council, or to a representative body.

The whole subject of Post-Justinian Roman Law is one of very great interest and importance. It has hardly been touched by English jurists, to whom a most fruitful field of research lies open. In my *Rede Lecture* I have endeavoured to show how Roman law was studied, taught, and developed for centuries after Justinian in the Byzantine Empire, and that in fact the civil law of Rome never suffered any real interruption. It has survived even under the Mussulman rule for the use of Christian subjects.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Rising Storm.]—These two incidents are related by Leo in a very graphic way, he being an eye-witness. He says, "Being a young student at the time, I saw Nicephorus pacing quietly on his horse through the streets, looking perfectly unmoved by these insults, and maintaining a bearing of composure just as if nothing unusual was occurring. I marvelled to see the intrepid spirit of the man, which was able to retain a serene composure in the midst of so alarming a riot." His account of the panic in the Hippodrome is equally vivid. The more I read Leo's history, the more ready I am to accept his authority and judgment. The literature of Byzantium is unjustly despised, if, on the ground of uncouthness and solecisms in the phrases, we pass over such sound and sensible memoirs as those of Leo.

CHAPTER XXXII

Clytemnestra.]—I have not felt bound to harmonise the somewhat contradictory accounts of the murder of Nicephorus, and I have permitted myself to adapt the account given by Schlumberger with considerable freedom. I am aware that the Basil whom Theophano struck in her fury was not her son, as M. Schlumberger states in a note on page 759. But the incident was too characteristic to be lost. I have not in this romance pretended to write exact history, but simply to produce a romantic monograph, based on a study of the best authorities, with a view of giving a picture of the general state of society at this epoch—which still remains one of the least familiar in what used to be called the Dark Ages.

ADDENDA.

p. 216. *Anemas.*]—The son of the old Emir was a real personage, celebrated in Byzantine history, and recorded in the "Tower of Anemas." See *Van Millingen*, p. 154.

p. 236.]—The lines from Æschylus are taken from Mr. Morshead's fine version of the *Agamemnon*.

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